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MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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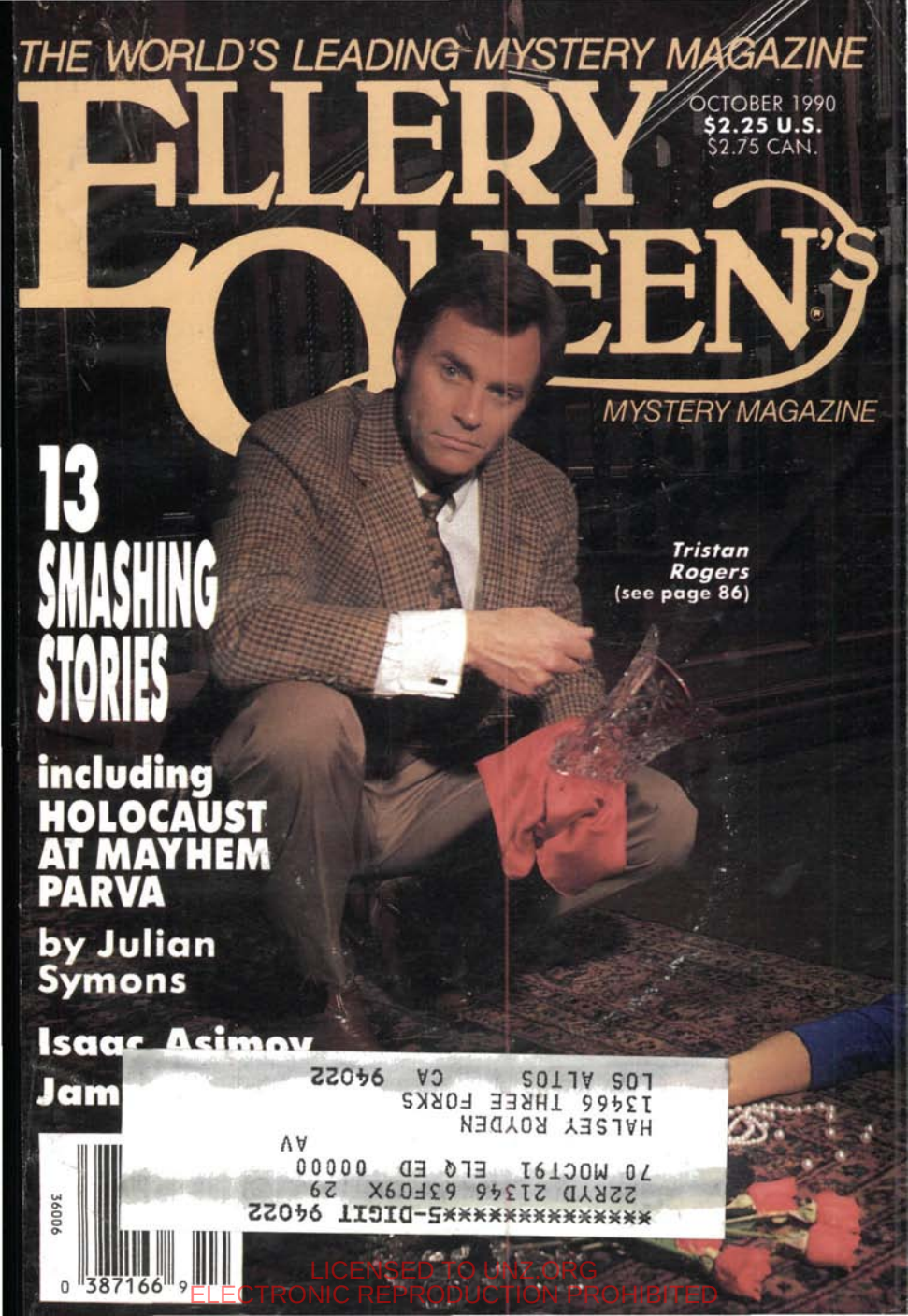

13 SMASHING STORIES

including
HOLOCAUST AT MAYHEM PARVA
by Julian Symons

Isaac Asimov

Jam

Tristan Rogers
(see page 86)

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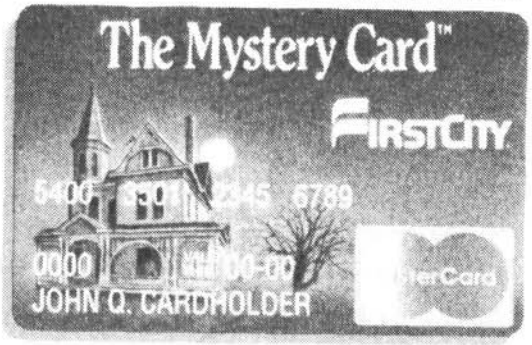

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JULIAN SYMONS

"But you were not with him in the conservatory—or the library—or his study?" Miss Harple asked Mrs. Peacock. A shaken head. "And you have met nobody else in the village who knew you in the past?" Head shaken again. The china-blue eyes looked hard at her. "Of course, if you left Mayhem Parva and returned to London—"

A third headshake, and the most decisive. "I've bought my house. And I love it here. It's so peaceful—so English."

Mayhem Parva—a joke name in the English mystery. Translated as Little Mayhem, of course . . .

HOLOCAUST AT MAYHEM PARVA

by JULIAN SYMONS

A fine summer morning in Mayhem Parva. Through the leaded light windows of her cottage in the High Street, Mrs. White, who thought of herself as the merry widow, watched Professor Plum walking along erratically as always, taking care to dodge the cracks in the pavement. He looked deplorably untidy in that old pullover, but still she thought he was a fine figure of a man, and one said to be susceptible to feminine charm. If she was at his table at the Vicarage tea party that afternoon, and sparkled—and she knew how to sparkle, who better?—anything might follow. A supper tête-a-tête, a little gentle dalliance, and then—well, she had really exhausted the pleasures of being a merry widow, and although the Professor had the reputation of being a permanent bachelor, interested only in the odd concoctions he brewed up in his laboratory, he

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had never seen the merry widow really sparkling. But of course it was necessary to arrange that she *should* sit at the same table. She picked up the telephone.

Outside Mr. Bunn the baker, the Professor had to sidestep dexterously to miss a couple of tricky hairline cracks in the pavement. An ancient Morris pulled up behind him with a shriek of brakes. The window was wound down and the Reverend Green's round shining countenance looked out at him.

"Is it not a beautiful day, Professor? All the live murmur of a summer's day, as the poet puts it. And where can the summer day murmur more seductively than here in Mayhem Parva?"

"Ha," said the Professor.

"We look forward so much to seeing you this afternoon." At that, Professor Plum merely nodded. The Reverend Green put his head on one side and said coyly, "A certain temptress has asked my dear Emerald if she may share your table."

"Ha," the Professor repeated.

"That makes you curious, I'm sure." In fact, the Professor had shown no sign of curiosity. "I fear you must wait for curiosity to be satisfied. What I can promise is that Emerald has prepared a sumptuous spread. But I have duties, I must fly." The ancient Morris moved off in a series of jerks.

The infernal Mrs. White, I suppose, the Professor thought. Stupid, simpering woman—not a patch on that fine little filly Mrs. Peacock, what's her name, Paula. Now if it had been Paula Peacock who'd asked to sit at his table— But that wasn't likely, and it wasn't the problem—which was what to do about the Vicar. Should he go to the boy's parents or confront the Vicar face to face and tell him he was a disgrace to the cloth? But suppose the man just laughed at him and the boy's people sent him off with a flea in his ear? Difficult, difficult. Better have a word with the Wise Woman, he thought, which was his name for Miss Harple.

Back in his ugly little house near the station, the Professor retired to his lab. He was working at the moment on a mixture made from spotted hemlock, which he believed to be good for asthma. Multiplex Chemicals had shown interest in taking it up on a commercial basis. But the problem of the Vicar was on his mind and he found it hard to concentrate and after half an hour gave up. He telephoned Miss Harple and asked if she could come over, as there was a confidential matter he couldn't discuss on the telephone . . .

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"A garden is a lovesome thing, God wot," the Reverend Green said as he leaned over the fence that separated the untidy Vicarage garden from Miss Harple's neat rosebeds, primrose and polyanthus borders, and rock garden cleverly devised in stripes of red, white, and blue. Miss Harple, who was weeding the rock garden, straightened up but did not reply. Even in gardening clothes, she looked elegant, her beautiful white hair perfectly dressed, her china-blue eyes innocent—or, as some said, icy.

"What does the philosopher tell us? That God Almighty first planted a garden, and that it is the purest of human pleasures."

"But it was entered by the serpent," Miss Harple said.

"Ah, you are too clever for me." She did not deny it. "Dear lady, may I venture to remind you that Emerald and I look forward to seeing you this afternoon in our rambling wilderness?"

"I have a guest coming down from London." She elaborated. "A gentleman."

"Of course he will be welcome—the more so because he comes as the escort of our dear Miss Harple, solver of all our mysteries, elucidator of every puzzle."

The Reverend Green passed a handkerchief over his face, smiled, bowed, opened his garden gate. Miss Harple looked after him for a moment, finished her weeding, and went into the kitchen. She had much to do before her guest arrived.

The letter plopped onto the mat.

Mrs. Peacock, eating her single slice of dry toast, drinking her sugarless tea—she knew the importance of preserving her figure—heard it and shivered a little. When she saw the square envelope with its carefully printed capitals, she had to force herself to open it. She read:

> I KNOW WHAT YOU WERE DOING WITH PROFESSOR PLUM IN THE CONSERVATORY—GET OUT OF MAYHEM PARVA YOU FILTHY WHORE

She put the letter beside the two others, deliberated during a long hot bath, and then went round to see Miss Harple.

Mrs. Peacock had come only recently to the village and almost the first person she met was Miss Harple. They had met before, when Miss Harple solved the mystery of the missing Egyptian diplomat, at a time when Mrs. Peacock was the Egyptian's mistress and was known as TouTou, the Peacock Fan dancer. Her maiden name, which

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she had never changed, was Betty Sludge, but, not unnaturally, she preferred Paula Peacock and—as she told Miss Harple—she wanted only to live quietly in Mayhem Parva, her days as TouTou forgotten.

Miss Harple read the letters, and then looked at Mrs. Peacock with those blue eyes that, as TouTou had said when being questioned by her during the Egyptian-diplomat affair, could see through a brick wall.

"Is there any truth in these stories?"

"None at all." She giggled, then stopped as she saw Miss Harple's frown. "Though Professor Plum is an attractive man."

"But you were not with him in the conservatory—or the library, as another letter says—or his study?" A shaken head. "And you have met nobody else in the village who knew you in the past?" Head shaken again. The china-blue eyes looked hard at her. "Of course, if you left Mayhem Parva and returned to London—"

A third headshake, and the most decisive. "I've bought my house. And I love it here. It's so peaceful—so *English*."

"Very well. Leave the letters with me. I will think about them. And don't worry. Every problem has a solution."

With TouTou gone, Miss Harple returned to her kitchen preparations, but not for long. This time when the doorbell rang, it was Miss Scarlett, who lived only a few yards away, in a lane leading off the High Street. Miss Harple didn't care for Miss Scarlett, whom she regarded as a malicious gossip, but she could be kind and gentle in the presence of distress and she saw that Miss Scarlett was upset. She sat her down now in the little sitting room crowded with knick-knacks and asked what was the trouble.

"I have had such a shock. This morning earlier, I was in Payne's the chemist. I went in to get some indigestion tablets, but also because—I wonder if you have heard the story about Elfrieda Payne and the grocer's boy. It seemed to me that he—I mean, Mr. Payne—was looking very *tense*, and when Elfrieda came down the stairs—"

"Miss Scarlett, I don't want to know about Mrs. Payne and the grocer's boy. Something has upset you. You were going to tell me about it."

"Yes, my tongue runs away with me. I got my tablets, turned round to go out, and came face to face with Colonel Mustard."

"The man who has taken a short lease on old Mrs. Cunningham's

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house now she's gone to live in Malta. I have met him once or twice—he seems pleasant enough."

"Oh, yes, he *seems* pleasant. But his name is not Colonel Mustard, and he is a swindler. He called himself Commander Salt when I knew him and persuaded me to invest in his company. It was called Electric Car Electrics. They were going to make very cheap electricity out of old newspapers soaked in sea water, which would run a new electric car. He said I should make a fortune, but he disappeared and I never saw a penny of my money back. Oh, it was such a shock."

If Miss Harple thought that a fool and her money are soon parted, she didn't say so. She gave Miss Scarlett a cup of tea and one of her homemade scones, found out by a few adroit questions that it was unlikely Miss Scarlett would have a case for legal action against Colonel Mustard, spoke soothing words, and said she would speak to the Colonel. She reflected that there were several fools with money in Mayhem Parva, but she did not say that to Miss Scarlett.

Colonel Mustard, alias Commander Salt, alias Group Captain Fairweather, did his usual hundred morning press-ups, ran round the garden half a dozen times, ate a hearty breakfast which he cooked himself, said "Top of the morning to you" to Mrs. Middleton the cleaner, and retired to his study to look through the draft prospectus for Uniworld Military Disposals, a company which according to the prospectus was being formed to buy out-of-date military equipment in European countries cheap, and sell it to the Third World. As the Colonel read through the draft, he talked to himself.

"Agents all over Europe—old uniforms, cooking equipment, armored cars, all sorts of electrical gear, out-of-date planes—going for a song, my dear sir, going for a song—no question of military use, m'dear madam, planes converted for commercial use, armored cars turned into jeeps, uniforms retailored as dungarees—endless possibilities—you'll see thirty percent a year on your money—and helping people who need it, shouldn't consider taking it on otherwise."

The Colonel made a few amendments, stood up, looked at himself in the glass, admired the soldierly look, the erect stance, the clipped moustache. "Ready to go, m'boy," he said. "If I'm not much mistaken, there's rich pickings in Mayhem Parva."

But Colonel Mustard was mistaken.

Miss Harple met her visitor, whom we will call simply the Author,

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at Mayhem Parva station, which had no waiting room and was hardly more than a halt. He was an awkward, shambling figure, who was writing a book about Agatha Christie. Miss Harple had known her well, and had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the works. As they walked back through the village, she told the Author of her busy morning, the Vicar's call, Mrs. Peacock's visit followed by that of Miss Scarlett, her own call on Professor Plum, whom she had found messing about in his laboratory. The Author listened, enthused about the well preserved village street, and was suitably impressed by Miss Harple's little Georgian home, Mayhem House, the Waterford glass on the shelves, and the bits of Minton china in cabinets.

"It will be rather a scrap lunch, I'm afraid," Miss Harple said when they were sipping dry sherry. "My maid of all work, Marilyn, is in bed with a gastric upset, and I must apologize for the place looking so untidy." In reality it could hardly have been neater. "And that means, I'm afraid, I shall have to give the Vicar's wife, Emerald Green, a hand this afternoon. There's a tea party at the Vicarage, and Marilyn was going to help with cutting bread, making sandwiches, all that sort of thing. If you'd like to come, Emerald would be very pleased, but perhaps you'd be bored by a Vicarage tea party."

On the contrary, the Author said, it would be a new and no doubt exciting experience. He wandered round the garden while Miss Harple laid lunch, noting the abundance of roses without a trace of blackspot or mildew, the pretty yellow jasmine climbing up the wall, the weedless grass, the yew tree that separated this tidy garden from the overgrown one next door.

After lunch, his hostess talked about Agatha Christie, her shyness, her love of true English villages like Mayhem Parva, her endless curiosity about tiny details most people overlooked or didn't notice, her relaxed charm with friends. The Author listened and made notes.

When lunch was over, and they had drunk coffee in a shady part of the garden, Miss Harple went round to lend a hand at the Vicarage, leaving the Author to look round the village before putting in an appearance at the tea party. He admired the old-fashioned colored bottles in the chemist's window and the sign outside the butcher that said BUTCHER AND GRAZIER, HOME-KILLED PORK, went into the well kept church, was amused by the name of the pub, which was called the Falling Down Man, went into one of the flourishing antique shops and considered buying a Victorian mother-of-pearl

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card-case, but decided it was too expensive. Then he made his way back to the Vicarage, where the tea party was in full swing.

There were little tables with four or six people sitting at them, plates of sandwiches, scones, and little cakes, dishes of trifle, ice cream. His hand was pressed by one that seemed damp with oil rather than water.

"You must be the friend of our dear Miss Harple. *So* good of you to come. Now let me see, where can we find room for—ah, but here is the lady herself. Thank you, my dear, I must confess to being a trifle parched." The Reverend Green accepted gratefully the cup of tea handed him, and wandered away.

"Here you are, then," Miss Harple said a little sharply. "Do you like trifle?"

"Well—I think perhaps—not after such an excellent lunch."

"You'll find chairs in the corner, and there's a place over here." She led the way to a table where three people sat, and introduced him. "This is Mrs. Peacock—Mrs. White—Professor Plum. And here is Emerald with a cup of tea."

Little Mrs. Green said it was nice to see any friend of Miss Harple, and recommended the tuna-paste sandwiches which she had made herself. The Author considered his companions. Mrs. Peacock sipped her tea delicately, Professor Plum drank his noisily while eating a piece of fruitcake, Mrs. White was occupied with a plate of creamy trifle decorated with hundreds and thousands. Mrs. White spoke to the Professor.

"This is really delicious, Professor, do try some."

"Don't fancy it." The Professor made a harrumphing noise, and said to Mrs. Peacock, "Settling down all right, are you? All very neighborly here in the village. That garden fence of yours could do with a bit of attention. Quite a handyman myself, if you need one."

Mrs. Peacock murmured that he was very kind, in a voice that sounded extremely refined. Mrs. White tittered slightly, leaned forward, and said, "I hear your laboratory is quite fascinating, Professor, that you make all sorts of wonderful old medicines there. I believe myself that the old remedies are much the best—"

She was interrupted by a prolonged, high-pitched scream. There was a crash, a sound of breaking crockery. Mrs. White stopped speaking to the Professor and said, in quite a different voice, "Whatever's the matter with Colonel Mustard?"

The Author turned and saw that a tall, red-faced man wearing a blue brass-buttoned blazer was on the ground, writhing and crying

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out unintelligible words. He had pulled over the table as he fell and lay in a welter of spilled tea cakes and sandwiches. The Reverend Green, Emerald, Miss Harple, and a man wearing spectacles were beside him. The woman who had screamed put a hand to her thin chest and cried: "I had nothing to do with it, it was nothing I said to him!" Miss Harple took her arm and said, "He's been taken ill, Miss Scarlett, nobody's blaming you. Doctor Playden will be able to help."

The man with spectacles looked up from beside the body and shook his head. "I'm afraid not. This man is dead."

Sometime later the Author sat on a sofa in Mayhem House, listening while Doctor Playden and Chief Inspector Haddock discussed the case with Miss Harple. He was amused by the way in which both men deferred to her.

"You're sure you feel up to the mark?" the doctor said. "I know you've been sleeping badly."

"I am perfectly well now," Miss Harple said, with her agreeable touch of acidity.

The Chief Inspector coughed. "Up to a point, it's straightforward enough. There was cyanide in his tea. The question is who put it there. The only other person permanently at his table was Miss Scarlett, though the Reverend Green sat there in between getting up to say hallo to people as they arrived, and chatting with them."

"And I believe three cups of tea were taken to the table by Emerald—Mrs. Green," Miss Harple ventured. The policeman nodded. "And she just put them down on the table? So it was by pure chance that the cup with cyanide in it came to Colonel Mustard." Miss Harple paused. "Unless Mrs. Green was the poisoner."

Doctor Playden protested. "You surely can't believe that."

Miss Harple spoke gently, her blue eyes innocent. "I am simply pointing out the possibility."

The policeman and the doctor were drinking whisky, the Author and Miss Harple her home-brewed mead. She spoke again, slowly. "Miss Scarlett had reason to dislike Colonel Mustard, but I don't think any cause to wish him dead. I think in the circumstances I should tell you about it." She did, and then went on: "But I have a feeling—"

"Yes?" the Chief Inspector said eagerly.

"That perhaps this is only the beginning. There was an old farmer we used to visit when I was a child, and he could always tell the

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weather after there'd been a storm. The sky might be blue again, not a cloud in sight, but he'd say: 'This was only the beginning, the real storm's still to come.' I feel like that old farmer. The real storm's still to come."

Miss Harple, as so often, was right. The Author, curious to follow the case and anxious to talk with her again about Agatha Christie, spent the night in the Falling Down Man, and at breakfast heard the news from the distraught landlord.

"Reverend Green's dead, sir, and that's not all. Ambulances been in and out the village all night, taking 'em to hospital. Doctor's not had a wink of sleep. There be so many taken ill, sir, it's an epidemic like except it's not. They say the Reverend died in his sleep, and I hear tell he was poisoned—they say it was all that tea party at the Vicarage."

The Author spent the next two days talking to people in the village. He paid a couple of calls on Miss Harple, but there seemed to be always a policeman in discussion with her—a Sergeant with the autopsy reports, a harassed-looking Chief Inspector, or the Chief Constable himself. She was obviously too busy to talk about Agatha Christie, and seemed disinclined to discuss the case, or cases, with him. The Author paid a visit to Professor Plum's house, in the company of Doctor Playden, and saw the laboratory. The Doctor, indeed, was friendly enough to tell him the detailed results of the autopsies on the six victims. It was after he had learned these that the Author paid Miss Harple another, and, as it proved, his last visit.

It was late evening, and his welcome was friendly, although not overwhelmingly so. Miss Harple was wearing a blue-brocade dress with a little lace round the neck and a matching piece of lace on her white hair. She looked elegant, but also frail and tired. She apologized for her failure to look out papers she had mentioned about Mrs. Christie, but said she would send them on to him.

"I didn't come to talk about Agatha Christie. I came to talk about the case."

"The case is solved. Mr. Haddock agreed with me that there was only one possible culprit—Professor Plum."

"But Professor Plum is dead."

"Precisely. He had always been eccentric, and it is plain that the eccentricity turned to madness. He had the means of making poisons in his laboratory, and had actually produced some of those used.

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What he did was the work of a madman, and when it was done he felt remorse. Why are you shaking your head?"

"I think there is a different explanation. Would you like to hear it?"

"It has been a long day. Will the explanation take long?"

"A few minutes."

"Talking is thirsty work. I know you enjoy a glass of mead. And perhaps you would like a biscuit."

The Author watched as she filled two glasses from a decanter and placed one beside each of their chairs. When she left the room to fetch the biscuits, he changed the glasses. On her return he began to talk, aware of his similarity to a detective in an Agatha Christie story gathering the suspects together to explain the case. Here, however, he had an audience of one.

"There were six victims. Colonel Mustard, who died at the tea party, Mrs. Peacock, the Reverend Green, and Professor Plum, who died during the evening or early night, Miss Scarlett, who died in her sleep, and Mrs. White, who died early on the following morning. Each died of a different poison. Colonel Mustard drank tea laced with cyanide, Mrs. Peacock an infusion of hemlock. The Reverend Green was poisoned by taxine and Professor Plum by gelsemium. Miss Scarlett took an overdose of chloral hydrate and Mrs. White was poisoned by arsenic."

"She was an exceptionally tiresome woman."

"It's interesting that you should say that. She was the only one to suffer a prolonged period of pain before death." Miss Harple looked at him sharply, then sipped her mead. The Author drank a mouthful of his.

"It would seem at first glance that the killer was somebody with a passion to try out the effects of different poisons, chosen at random. Nothing at all appeared to link them. But that was not the case."

The Author waited as if for questions, but Miss Harple did not speak.

"The link was Agatha Christie. All of these poisons were used in her stories. Cyanide, of course, quite often, most notably in *Sparkling Cyanide*. Coniine, which is derived from spotted hemlock, was used in *Five Little Pigs*, taxine in *A Pocket Full of Rye*, gelsemium in *The Big Four*. One of the victims in another novel took an overdose of chloral hydrate, and arsenic was used in a story called 'The Tuesday Night Club.' The murderer, then, was somebody with an expert

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knowledge of the Christie canon, something that ruled out Professor Plum, who hardly had a work of fiction in his house."

"But he made coniine in his laboratory."

"Quite true. Doctor Playden told me he was in hopes of it being adopted as a remedy for asthma. You were friendly with him, often visited the laboratory. I think you took a phial with you on one visit and filled it from his jar of coniine."

"And where do you suggest I found those other exotic poisons?"

"Two of them from your garden. Gelsemium is derived from yellow jasmine, which grows plentifully up your house wall, and taxine comes from the berry of the yew tree. I noticed a fine specimen at the bottom of the garden. Cyanide is still an old-fashioned way of getting rid of wasps and arsenic of rats, although of course they have to be extracted with some care."

"Chloral hydrate is not easily obtainable."

"Doctor Playden prescribed it for you because you told him you were sleeping badly. You saved it up and then, with your usual thoughtfulness, gave it to Miss Scarlett as a sleeping draught. I remember that after our discussion when Colonel Mustard died, you said you were worried about Miss Scarlett, and went round to see her."

Miss Harple straightened the lace round her neck. "And I suppose you think I gave little Marilyn something to upset her stomach so that I could replace her as Emerald's assistant at the tea party?" The Author nodded. "You are really very ingenious. Ingenious but ridiculous. Nobody will believe this nonsense. Have a biscuit."

He shook his head. "When I tell the Chief Inspector about the yellow jasmine and the yew tree, I think he'll take notice."

"You really suggest I put those various poisons into the teacups?"

"Yes. You carried round most of the cups and some of the cakes. It wouldn't have been difficult to give them to the right people."

"Arsenic in tea would taste distinctly bitter."

"Of course. I should have mentioned that. You knew Mrs. White liked trifle and copied the Christie story in which the arsenic was in the hundreds and thousands on top of the trifle."

"There is one thing you have forgotten."

"I don't think so."

"The three teacups were taken to Colonel Mustard's table by Emerald Green, not by me. I couldn't possibly have known he would take the cup containing the cyanide."

"Oh, that was clever. But then of course you took that from Agatha

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Christie, too, and adapted it for your own purposes. There is a story in which the poisoner wants a victim and doesn't care who it is, anyone in a group will do. You didn't mind which of the three at their table took the cup with cyanide, because all of them were going to die. The other cups contained the hemlock and the taxine." He yawned. He felt very tired.

"I congratulate you. You are perfectly right."

"Thank you."

"You may have been puzzled by my motives. I simply wanted to preserve the reputation of this unspoiled English village."

Miss Harple leaned forward and looked at him intently. The Author found it hard to meet the gaze of those icy blue eyes. "Colonel Mustard had plans for inducing some of our credulous residents to invest in his companies, and they would have been ruined. Mrs. Peacock had a past which—I won't dwell on it, but she was really not the kind of person we want here. I did my best to get her to leave by sending some letters suggesting she was carrying on an entirely fictitious affair with Professor Plum and telling her she would be happier back in London, but she insisted on staying here. A pity—I rather liked her. Miss Scarlett I did *not* like. She was a busybody, mischief-maker, tale-teller, really no loss. Neither was Mrs. White, who always thought of herself as the merry widow—which meant that she set her cap at any eligible man she met, in a way I found most distasteful. The Reverend Green's conduct was scandalous—I shall say no more than that. And Percy Plum—" her voice, which had been jarring as a clatter of steel needles, softened to little more than a whisper "—was part crazy, but part a wonderfully clever scientist. I was very fond of Percy."

"Then why—?"

"Because of his discovery." Miss Harple looked down at the carpet, her manner almost coy. "In his experiments, Percy had stumbled by chance on what crime writers have feared might exist for years, the undetectable poison. He told me the secret, and of course it is safe with me, but the silly fellow insisted it should be made public. Can you imagine the result for books like Mrs. Christie's? It would no longer be possible to write them. Why didn't I use the poison, you may ask? That wouldn't have been fair play, would it? And when we try to imitate crime writers, we must always observe fair play." She broke off. "You worked things out very well, but you made one mistake. Shall I tell you what it was?"

The Author nodded. He found it hard to keep his eyes open.

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"You failed to notice that when I left this room to get the biscuits I could see what you were doing in the looking glass placed just over there beside the bust of Agatha Christie. I had expected you to take the precaution of changing the glasses, and had prepared my own glass of mead accordingly. Of course, if you had not changed the glasses, I should have knocked over my own by accident."

"You mean—" The Author tried to rise, but found that his legs refused to obey him. He saw Miss Harple now as through a mist.

" 'To cease upon the midnight with no pain'—a beautiful line, I always think. It is a minute to midnight now, and I think I can trust you with the secret of the undetectable poison. The three elements are—"

Those were the last words the Author heard.

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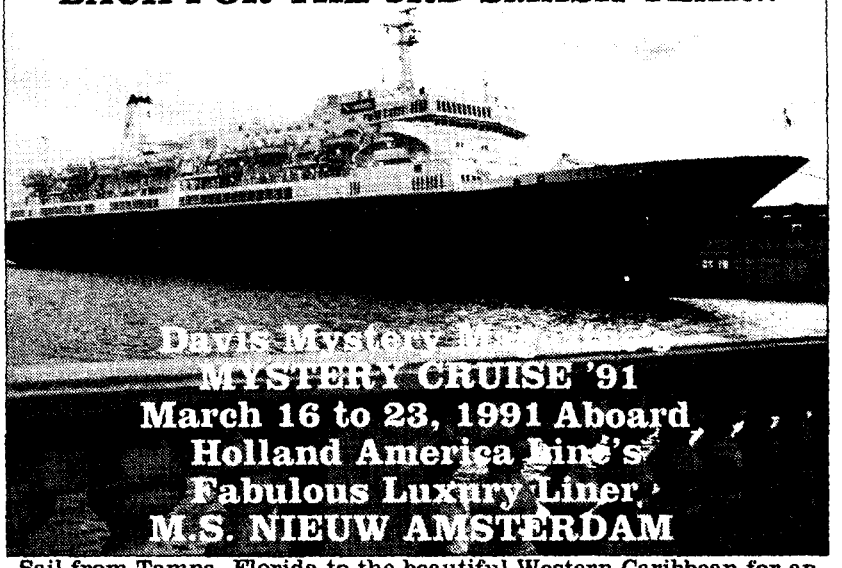

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a *NEW* short story by

E. J. WAGNER

Ruth was very nervous. It had taken much longer than she had expected to wash the spinach free of sand and she had only an hour before the guests arrived. She kept one ear cocked for sounds of Alex in the living room. So far, she hadn't heard him open the liquor cabinet to pour himself a stiff one ahead of time as he usually did.

E. J. Wagner and her husband live on Long Island "in the custody of" two large Labradors who were recently the subject of an article by the author published in The New York Times. *The Wagners have two grown daughters. Her profession is lecturing on the history of crime and forensic science and she is currently collaborating on a novel based on a historical murder . . .*

COOK'S CHOICE

by E. J. WAGNER

Thursday, May 21—the Home/Style page of the *Apple Valley Record*:

This week's Cook's Choice for an elegant addition to a spring dinner party is as fresh and verdant as the season itself—tiny individual molds of spinach that food sophisticates call "timbales." They couldn't be simpler to make. Here's how:

3 lbs. fresh spinach, washed, blanched, and pureed
1½ cups whole milk
½ cup grated bread crumbs
3 minced and sauteed shallots
6 sprigs minced fresh dill
¼ tsp. fresh grated nutmeg

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Mix ingredients thoroughly in a large bowl. Add salt and pepper to taste. Divide mixture between six buttered molds or custard cups and bake in water bath at 350°F for 30 minutes. Unmold on individual plates and surround each with a vivid, flavorful sauce—a fresh tomato coulis, perhaps. The timbales will look like 3-inch-high bright-green hats with red brims! Serve warm—and wait for compliments!

Saturday, May 23. Ruth has clipped the recipe and stuck it to the refrigerator door with a magnet shaped like a goose. The goose is wearing a blue bonnet. Ruth is wearing a striped apron. She is concentrating, trying to follow the recipe exactly. She scrapes the spinach puree out of the Cuisinart into a large blue bowl. She is very nervous—it took much longer than she had expected to wash the spinach free of sand and she has only an hour before the guests arrive. She keeps one ear cocked for sounds of Alex in the living room. So far, she hasn't heard him open the liquor cabinet to pour himself a stiff one ahead of time as he usually does—thank God for that. Sweat oozes down her back and a tiny nerve painfully vibrates near her eye. She slides a dollop of spinach onto her tongue—and feels grit. Grit! Oh, God—she'd washed it and washed it! How *can* there be any sand left?

She chews—and decides the grit was a crumb of nutmeg. She glances at the recipe and measures the milk. Her hand trembles—and a white snake of milk slithers across the ceramic-tile counter. She attacks it with a corner of her apron. She can smell the chicken, which, trussed and coated with herbs, slowly roasts in the big wall oven. If she can keep calm, she can get it all done.

The tomato coulis simmers on the range. It has taken most of the afternoon to accomplish this—following the recipe in *French Cooking Made Simple*, sliding all those damn tomatoes into boiling water and then into cold and then peeling them, the juice spurting, making the knife slip, then forcing out the seeds and chopping at the flesh with a cleaver, frightened all the time that she was doing it wrong—but now, as the bright-red coulis, redolent of basil and bay leaf, gently quivers in the white pot, it all seems worth it. If she can finish the timbales quickly, and slide them into the oven under the rack holding the chicken in the next few minutes, she'll have time to shower and do something about her face.

Alex is standing in the doorway. "Do you need help?" he says. He's wearing fresh white slacks and a matching shirt. In his hand

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is a squat crystal glass containing two ice cubes and four thick fingers of Scotch. Ruth bites her lip.

"You look all hot and flustered," he tells her. "Are you sure there isn't something I can do?" His tone is tolerant, reasonable. She stirs the spinach mixture fiercely, shakes her head.

"Look," he continues, "I want you to know I'm sorry. About last night."

There are six porcelain molds on the counter in front of her. Each one has a different bird painted on its side. She smears butter on a piece of waxed paper and begins to grease the one with the cardinal.

"I did say I was sorry," Alex says, his voice rising a little. He comes toward her. "Does it hurt?" he asks, his voice gentle now, his fingers reaching toward her right cheek, where the dark-blue bruise glows like a huge evil flower. She jerks away. "Ruth, look—I know it was unforgivable. I know that. I could cut my hand off. There's no excuse for what I did—no matter how you upset me. But you *are* provoking, Ruth. You have some responsibility in this. You can't deny it was partly your fault. *Do* you deny it?" His voice is louder.

"No," she says, "no," keeping her eyes down. "A lot was my fault."

"I mean you knew—you *knew*—that last night's presentation was vital to me, and you picked last night to forget to bring my slides."

"I'm sorry—I didn't mean to forget."

"But it's *always* something. You don't plan ahead. Look at yourself right now—it's almost time and you're not dressed and dinner is only half cooked. And you know damn well that it's vital that tonight goes perfectly—these people have my career in their hands."

A fine glaze of perspiration blooms on her skin. "Please," she says. "Please. I can do it. Just go and relax in the living room."

"Okay," he tells her. "Okay. As long as you don't want any help."

She looks at the clock. Only half an hour left. Her face throbs. She adds the cheese, crumbs, and shallots to the spinach along with the dill (the dill isn't fresh—there was none at the store—and she hopes desperately that it won't be noticed), and stirs it all together quickly, spattering some of it on the counter. As carefully as her shaking hands allow, she divides the mixture between the six molds with the bird decorations and eases them into a baking pan half full of warm water.

Five minutes later, the spinach timbales are resting in the oven on the shelf beneath the roasting chicken and Ruth is taking the steps two at a time to the master bedroom. It's warm there—the

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windows are closed and the air thick with the smell of Scotch and aftershave.

She races into the bathroom, turns on the shower full blast. The water stings her bruised face. When she dresses, she stops every few seconds to check her watch. She must get down before the timbales are done. With accustomed fingers, she mixes Dermablend ("Hides scars, dark circles, and prominent veins!") in the palm of one hand and tenderly spreads it over her discolored cheek. She slips on a white-cotton caftan and races for the door.

She reaches the kitchen just as the timer rings and heads for the oven, pausing only to turn the heat off under the coulis. Gently, gently, she slides the pan holding the timbales out of the oven. They look perfect. The spinach is an intense, vivid green within the brilliant white of the porcelain molds and the aroma is intoxicating.

There are six small white plates with gold rims on the counter. Ruth pulls one toward her. Using a padded mitt, she lifts one mold from the water bath, dries it on a towel, inverts it over the plate, and shakes it slightly. She shakes it a little harder. She feels the weight of the timbale shift and slide. Delicately, she lifts the mold away from the plate and, holding her breath, peers down at her creation.

At the bottom of the small plate lies a sullen-looking green puddle. Oozing from it is a thin, bile-colored fluid which inexorably approaches, then overflows, the gold rim and drips onto the counter. Frantic, she grabs the next mold, sees that it, too, is full of the same soupy mass. Oh, God, what did she do wrong? What is she going to do?

There is a warning rumble from the range behind her. She whirls—and just a bit too late realizes that she had not turned the flame under the coulis off, but in fact higher. The sauce erupts, belching great gouts of thick red pulp onto the ceiling. She grabs the pot and flings it into the sink—streaking her caftan.

"What the hell is going on here? What the holy hell are you doing, you moron?"

Alex is striding toward her. He slams his drink down on the counter. She thinks dully that this must be at least his third, so much time has passed since he started. "They're going to be here any minute. What have you done to this kitchen, you dumb bitch?"

She backs up against the counter and whimpers.

"I'm going to kill you, you bitch."

She has her eyes almost completely closed. All she can see is the

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goose-shaped magnet holding the recipe onto the refrigerator, the little blue bonnet on the goose. Perhaps it won't hurt much. Her cheek throbs.

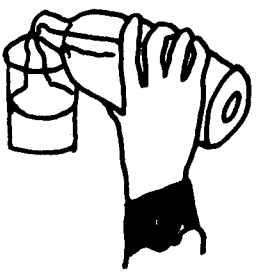
"You'll never spoil anything for me again because I'm going to split your goddamn head open!"

"You bloody well won't, you bastard!" cries a voice, thick with rage. Ruth's eyes fly open and shift around the white, shiny kitchen. She realizes with amazement that the voice is her own.

Alex is amazed, too—he is absolutely astounded. His face inches from hers, his reddened eyes wide with shock as he recognizes the absolute righteous fury which infuses her. His eyes are riveted on hers, so that he doesn't see her hand snake out and grab the carbon-steel carving knife, doesn't realize what is happening until it's much too late.

Thursday, May 28—the Home/Style page of the *Apple Valley Record*:

> Last week's Cook's Choice column left out an ingredient in the recipe for spinach timbales. Four large lightly beaten eggs should be incorporated into the spinach mixture before baking. The eggs, as experienced cooks no doubt realized, are the binding agent which holds the dish together. We regret any inconvenience.



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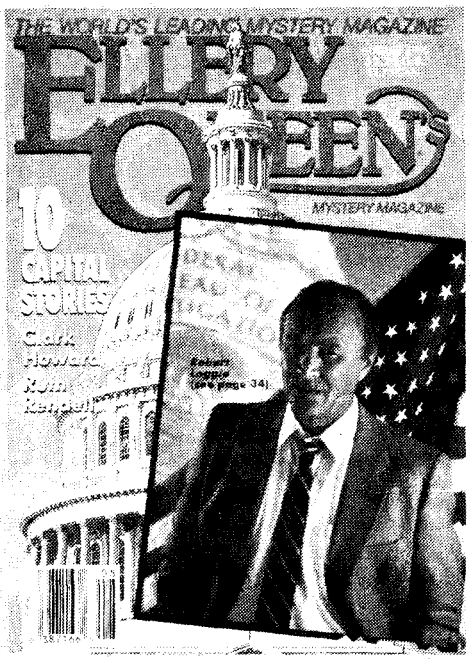

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

A most unusual first crime fiction from David Dean, who is thirty-six and the father of three. He spent a number of years in his early twenties traveling the country and has "been everything from a grounds-tender in a cemetery to an actor." He was a paratrooper with the 82nd Airborne and an NCO and is now a police officer.

This latter, along with Mr. Dean's fiction-writing ability, adds credence to "The See-Through Man," his victim, and his nemesis . . .

THE SEE-THROUGH MAN

by DAVID DEAN

Mrs. Singleton had not had a visitor for several days and now sat at her front window wondering if she ever would again. The day was fading quickly into the winter dusk and was hastened along by the sleety rain. Traffic on her street was so infrequent that she briefly wondered if it was a holiday she had forgotten. These days she often forgot dates that had once been charged with meaning for her. She sometimes wept with the effort of trying to remember her children's birthdays. It was all so impossible now. She knew that the children sometimes visited from Philadelphia, but couldn't remember any details of their comings and goings. They were little more than benign but distant phantoms. The lady who was paid to come by and check on her and buy her groceries didn't even have a face.

The day had gone now, taking with it the last of the light, leaving her face haloed in the window by her own lamp. The last car that had passed was only twin beams of red light followed by the hissing sound of its tires on the wet asphalt. Night had sealed her in.

Her home faced east toward the great and sluggish swells of the

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Atlantic, which were invisible to her now but still audible two blocks distant. She took another sip of the water glass full of whiskey that her long-dead husband would have forbidden and began to dream.

She floated now, disembodied, toward the sound of the sea, through the wet darkness, and away from her hated confinement. Although it was very dark, she could see quite clearly as she glided silently over the roofs of empty summer homes and the carefully tended cottages of fellow retirees and widows. She even fancied that one elderly lady, standing at her kitchen sink, seemed to sense her passing and scanned the night skies without knowing why.

Then she arrived at the shore, which was much louder than she remembered from her youthful holidays. It was deafening and ponderous—noplace to find peace or repose. This was a battle line drawn by nature, with the grey and foaming sea pounding the earth senseless and demanding dominion. She was less than nothing here.

Now she thought that she would simply float upward, her greyness merging with that of the sky and sea, rendering her free of pain and mercifully free of her world. She spread her arms wide, tilted her head up toward the heavens, and began her ascent.

There was a tug, hardly noticeable at first, and she continued upward. The second tug made her teeth click together and forced her to look down. There was a gossamerlike cord running from her to the sea below.

It disappeared into the waves and was now slack. As her eyes traveled its length, trying to find its source and fathom its meaning, it went suddenly taut and began to draw her downward. Now she began to fight. She had no wish to touch those cold and alien waters, and so spread her arms once more to ascend. But the cord would not release her. Its pull was steady and inexorable and she began to thrash and cry. She was now beginning to feel the spray from the waves beneath and her gaze could not waver from the cord that led her down. Down to something white lurking below the waters—and just now becoming visible as the first wave doused her with its icy greeting.

She began to wail as an approaching wave created a frigid trough to bury her in. Then she saw her captor. The retreating waters exposed him, standing somehow, in all this tumult, with his thin hands clutching the cord leading into her. His thin, frail body was tensed with effort as he steadily reeled her in, hand over hand, with a determined expression on his boyish face. When he saw her fear, he grinned.

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Mrs. Singleton's whiskey spread warmly over her lap, causing her to further wet herself and slowly come back up through the layers of unconsciousness, to arrive panting and sweating in her own chair. Her face was still illuminated in her window, like a ghost haunting her own street.

Julian sat up quickly, slapping at the nighttable in search of the alarm clock that was so insistently buzzing and sending the phone and several books flying instead. The alarm was untouched and letting him know it. With a muttered curse, he rose and found the lamp hanging on the wall above his head. Somehow, without dislodging it, he was able to turn on the light and locate the alarm. With a conscious effort, he restrained himself from destroying the clock and simply turned it off.

He sat on the edge of the bed for a moment and listened. The rest of his small ranch-style home was silent. The children must be sleeping, he thought. And so they should be at ten-thirty on a school night. He noted that Anne wasn't in bed, so she must be in the living room reading, or perhaps in the bathroom preparing for a shower. Julian allowed himself to imagine her undressing and bending over the faucets to turn on the water. The bathroom would quickly become fogged and steamy. He thought of slipping naked and unexpected into the shower with her, but as with the clock he reined himself in and didn't follow through on his impulse. He guessed that he would have been rebuffed in any case.

Julian knew that Anne loved him and he hoped that she didn't know that he was obsessed with her. It was all a matter of degree. Since their marriage eleven years ago, his desire for her company, her thoughts, and her touch seemed to grow with each passing year. He was secretly afraid that he was growing less mature as she became more alluring, desirable, and ultimately unknowable. He feared in his heart of hearts that he loved her more than she loved him, though she gave him no overt reasons for thinking so and, in fact, during those few and precious moments between children and jobs they shared an intense passion together. He also didn't fear or suspect her of infidelity. So what is it, then? he wondered. Just getting older? He was thirty-five. Or is it the job?

He stood and slipped on his bathrobe and his watch and walked out of the bedroom and down the hall. The bathroom was empty. Around the corner, he saw a dull glow emanating from the living room. Anne was reading. Julian felt a moment's pang of disappoint-

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ment. He would very much have liked to see her naked, preferably wet and naked. He sighed, switched on the light, and approached the sink and bathroom mirror.

My God, he thought, I look like a vampire. His face stared back at him in disgust. His eyes were bloodshot and his face was the color of writing paper. He began to splash cold water on it. Well, why not? he thought. Half of my life is spent in the dark. Irregular hours, bizarre sleeping patterns, minimal time with the family, and a hostile public.

He lathered his face and began to shave, wincing at the pull of the dull razor. A cop in a small town on the Jersey shore. During the season there were thousands of rowdy drunks to fight and corral, and parties that resembled barely controlled riots both in their numbers and temperament. During the winter, there was the local riffraff dealing drugs, occasionally killing themselves and/or burglarizing the homes of summer residents. Tit for tat. The locals were overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of summer visitors and overawed by their BMWs and their money. So during the long winter months some of them attempted to even the score.

Julian rinsed the remnants of shaving cream from his face and attacked his stand-up hair with a brush. When done, he looked again at his face and thought, Better, but not good. His face looked tired and uneasy. He *was* uneasy. He knew that part of it came from working midnights. Every officer he knew complained of the same thing. It wasn't natural working in the dead of night and trying, with questionable success, to sleep during the day. You had little or no contact with your family and saw few others but those you worked with. It was isolating and unnatural. Julian knew, as he did each month when his week of midnights rolled around, that it was this that contributed to his feelings of insecurity with Anne, but that did little to alleviate his anxiety. Neither did the knowledge that he was on special assignment again tonight to catch a ghost.

He left the bathroom and went down the hall to the kitchen, passing the living room on the way. Anne was curled up in an easy chair reading a book on early-childhood education. She glanced up at Julian as he passed. Before he reached the kitchen, she had returned to her book, her absorption barely disturbed. Julian filled the kettle with water for coffee and slammed it down on a burner, making more noise than was necessary looking for the filters, the coffee, and the mug.

I'm not sure she saw me, he thought. I know she looked up, but

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I didn't see me register on her face. She looked right through me. Maybe that's why we can't catch our phantom. We're looking, but we're just not seeing him. We're seeing through him. The kettle began to whistle.

Michael watched the old lady's face intently from his car. He had been sitting across the street from her for some time now and was fascinated by her starts and twitchings. He had parked between street lamps and knew that her own light only deepened the darkness he sat in. In fact, he knew further still that if he wished he could walk through her yard and into her house without fear of being seen. Neither the house nor its lone occupant could resist him. He had proven this many times over the last few days. If a door wouldn't open, he would simply kick it in. The sound would be contained by his will and no neighbor would be alarmed, the police never alerted. He laughed when he thought how easy it had all become.

It had taken a lot of preparation, though. Hours of study and prayer. Dozens of sacrifices and finally a great and beautiful ritual in which he had killed his favorite dog. This had hurt him, but he knew in his heart that His Lord must have blood and that it was so much better if that blood were dear.

The German shepherd now lay bloating in the trunk of his car. Michael hadn't yet been able to part with his childhood companion, though he knew the stench would soon make it necessary. Tomorrow, perhaps—because tonight was the Vernal Equinox and he had something to do.

Tonight he would go inside with the old woman. He would glide like a shadow into her house, or, if necessary, he would muffle the sounds of breaking glass or splintering wood with his power and still enter. He would walk unseen through her second-floor rooms, knowing that she'd be staring in terror at her own first-floor ceiling, wondering in a haze of misery whether he'd come downstairs or not.

The phone would be no good to her, as he planned to cut the outside line as he had done a half dozen times this week at other homes. The Lord Satan had given him this inspiration in a dream! It was a wicked gift!

Then down he would come. Perhaps invisible, at first. Taking time to study the sour fear etched on the old woman's face. Perhaps moving a few pieces of furniture around to confuse her. It was hilarious how the slightest change in the expected order of things reduced old

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people to total, disgusting helplessness. This he couldn't tolerate and he would reveal himself when he saw it happen. If, like last night, it did happen, and he fully expected it to, then he would offer her up.

Last night, it had been unexpected. His concentration must have wavered for a moment because she suddenly saw him. He could see it in her face. A revelation! A focus finally for her terror. She actually saw him and not through him! He had been startled, then fascinated, at how she changed. He couldn't stop staring at her. Her face, slack and stuporous with fear a moment ago, suddenly became flushed and fixed with rage! Her mouth was working without making sounds, opening and closing mechanically. He'd had a sudden vision of her biting him with her few ancient, reeking teeth, then suddenly a glass ashtray came hurtling at him. She had missed by a mile, but it broke the spell.

His mouth now formed itself into a set, determined grin. He had advanced on her like a fighting cock, almost hopping in anticipation. Then, slowly and methodically, he began to pummel her. In a parody of boxing matches he had seen on television, he jabbed, feinted, and searched for an opening. Whenever he found one, he put all of his hundred and thirty-five pounds behind the blow. His bony knuckles reduced her face to raw meat and pleading eyes, and when she finally went down he stood over her, heaving. Her gurgling moans and sighs infuriated him—how dare she keep on living?

He ran to the kitchen, where he had previously noticed a pegboard for household items. He took down a four-foot extension cord and returned to the living room. Like some great slug, oozing blood instead of slime, she was slowly pulling herself toward the front door. He took his time walking to her and carefully looped the cord around her neck so that he could place one foot on her back and pull the ends tight by leaning back, using his weight rather than his exhausted strength.

Then a car door slammed directly in front of the house. He had needed no further warning. His sense of self-preservation was keen and always on the alert. He had slid out of a side window and hopped a low fence and arrived back at his beat-up grey Malibu before he knew it. The muffler had seemed incredibly loud when he started the car and it had briefly crossed his mind to have it looked at the next day. *Would* there be a next day? She had seen him! He would punish himself for his momentary lapse of faith.

But the faith had not been broken, after all. The morning news-

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papers stated that the old lady could not give a description of her attacker, as her cataracts made her functionally blind. She had seen nothing but a blur. How great was his master! Tonight he would repay him.

The older-model four-door Dodge traveled slowly eastbound on 22nd Street until it reached the intersection with First Avenue, where it halted. Julian pondered his options. He knew that anyone with half a brain could spot his vehicle as an unmarked car a block away, even in the dark. He thought it best if he could find a good observation point and settle, and if nothing happened move onto another vantage point. But where? There were no hills or tall buildings. It was amazing how a basically featureless, off-season resort town could suddenly become such a rat's maze. This bastard was always a step ahead. Maybe even now he had just turned a corner as the unmarked unit drifted to a stop. Damn him! Day shift had practically been abandoned in favor of augmenting the night patrols, but since the old girl had been found last night no one was complaining.

Things were different now. This was a very different story from the usual winter games of cat-and-mouse. This boy seemed to be made of smoke. What was he about? Eleven burglaries in five days, seven of which were occupied homes, all elderly, and then last night's assault. Assault, hell! He had just missed killing her.

For that matter, who was to say it was a boy, at all? Two people had seen this ghost, not counting last night's victim. One lady had entered her darkened bedroom just as the burglar had finished climbing through the window. She was too paralyzed with fright to turn on the light and he had coolly exited the same way. The other witness had awakened just in time to see the burglar walking from her bedroom into the hallway and down the stairs. She had called out, thinking it was her teenaged daughter. Both descriptions, however vague as to the face or sex, agreed as to the subject being about five-eight, very slender, and having shoulder-length hair. That narrowed it down to only a few thousand suspects.

Julian's nose wrinkled in disgust. Damn the smell around here, too. What *was* that? He briefly scanned the dimly lit curbs for a dead animal. There was none visible. A sick dog must have run under someone's house and died, he thought. There'll be hell to pay in the spring when they reopen their house. Well, this wouldn't be the area he would set up his surveillance—the stench settled that.

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He guided the car left and northbound onto First Avenue, glancing at Mrs. Singleton's home on the corner as he did. There was her lamp in the front window, as usual, but no Mrs. Singleton. Ordinarily she sat staring at her own reflection in the window far into the morning hours. It was more than likely she was too crocked to make it to the window tonight. That was usual, too. He had been on several calls to her house to help the cleaning lady pick her up and put her to bed on the couch. Julian drove on.

At the next intersection, he slowed and pulled to the curb. The smell reminded him. When was the last time he had seen Mrs. Singleton? He knew from experience that it didn't take but a day or two, in a closed-up house, for a body to become fetid. Especially in an overheated house like Mrs. Singleton's.

He put the car into a slow U-turn and at the same time called dispatch on his portable radio. "Eleven twenty-three to Eleven."

"Eleven, go ahead."

"Frank, is Mrs. Singleton at 2188 First Avenue on the 'Seniors Alone' program?"

There was a pause while the dispatcher flipped through a Rolodex. "Eleven to Eleven twenty-three, negative."

"Eleven twenty-three, received." So no one knew who had last seen the old lady. She didn't phone in each morning, like the others in her situation, to let the department know she was still kicking. Consequently, no one missed her and no one checked on her. That smell could be her.

"Eleven twenty-three to Eleven."

"Go ahead, Eleven twenty-three."

"Frank, could you try and find a number for Mrs. Singleton at the address I gave you? If you can, give her a call just to make sure she's okay and let me know. I know it's late, but I'm heading that way now."

"Ten-four, Eleven twenty-three."

Julian shut off the headlights and rolled to a stop near the house. He sat listening for the sound of a phone ringing. The night air was uncomfortably cold with the window down, but he heard nothing. He also noticed the smell was absent here on the east side of her house. Frank's voice made him jump.

"Eleven to Eleven twenty-three."

"Go ahead, Eleven."

"Jule, we're getting an out-of-order message at her number."

Julian's mind was racing now. Out-of-order. Could that bastard

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have gotten here a few days ago? He had to start moving now. "Frank, I'll be out at the address. Could you have another car start heading this way?"

"Ten-four."

Julian left the car without slamming the door and crossed into the shadow of the house quickly. He began to play the beam of his penlight along the wall, looking for the telephone junction box. There it was, the bastard's calling card—the neatly cut telephone line! Julian began to perspire as he approached the back door and imagined what he might find inside. How long had she been there, and what had he done to her?

The back door was unlocked and opened quietly as he entered the darkened kitchen. He could see that the living room was dimly lit but that he would have to cross a blacked-out dining room full of furniture to reach it. He reminded himself that he would have to breathe and wondered at the absence of the smell here in the house. He began his journey.

He was halfway through the dining room when he saw Mrs. Singleton. She was sitting rather primly at her old settee, swaying gently back and forth, staring at the stairs to the second floor. Julian was both relieved and embarrassed. What the hell was she staring at?

He spoke quietly, hoping not to startle her. "Mrs. Singleton, it's Julian Hall from the Police Department. We hadn't seen you for a while and got worried. Are you okay?"

She now turned her vague, watery focus on him with a look of pleasant amazement. "Why, yes, of course."

Julian heard footsteps above his head and then the sound of a piece of furniture being moved along the floor. He looked back to Mrs. Singleton, who had resumed her vigil. His throat was dry when he spoke again.

"Mrs. Singleton, do you have a visitor?"

She favored him with a smile this time. "My son is upstairs. He told me to wait and he would be right down."

Her son? It was three o'clock in the morning. Julian could hear the casual, unhurried tread upstairs moving down the hall to the head of the stairs. He drew the 9mm semiautomatic from the holster at the small of his back and stepped in front of Mrs. Singleton, assuming a crouch and a two-handed hold on the pistol. A pair of sneakers stepped into sight. The top half of the body was still in

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total darkness. Just then Julian's portable suddenly crackled into life:

"Eleven o-four to Eleven twenty-three. Are you in the house?"

It was his backup, a uniformed patrol that had just arrived!

The feet disappeared, pounding up the steps and into the unchartered second floor. Julian shook himself out of his stance and grabbed at his portable. "He's in here! Watch the second floor and send more backup!"

The patrol officers responded quickly, each running to a separate corner of the house to have maximum observation and coverage.

It was hardly necessary. The burglar came right out of a second-floor window and dropped lightly to the ground. He was running as soon as his feet touched earth. The two patrolmen were caught off-guard and he darted between them and into the street, making a bee-line for a smashed-up-looking grey Chevy.

Julian heard the cries of the uniforms and bolted out the front door after his quarry. He knew it was bad procedure, but he had to meet the invisible man. He was pounding across the yard when he ran smack into a wall of stench and heard the Chevy roar into life. In the back of his mind he wondered how often the driver had been stopped for no muffler.

He changed directions abruptly and headed for the unmarked. The Chevy raced past him and turned right toward the Boardwalk. Julian executed a high-speed U-turn, running up into someone's yard to make it. He made the right and threw the emergency light onto the dashboard and activated it.

The Chevy cut its lights and made another right, southbound now. He made the next left without even touching the brakes and Julian would have lost him if he hadn't been so close on his heels. The Chevy was now heading toward the Boardwalk at high speed and Julian estimated he was doing upwards of sixty when he climbed onto the Boardwalk ramp and began traveling the length of the fishing pier.

He slowed. There was no hurry now. The Chevy had to stop or drive off the pier into the ocean.

The Chevy braked once before plowing into the guardrail end of the pier. But it had no chance of stopping at that point and dropped quickly from sight, leaving Julian wondering if it had been there at all. When the backup car arrived, all he could do was point to the ocean.

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When they walked to the pier's end, he could see with a spotlight that the car had landed right-side-up. It was low tide and the Chevy was under three feet of water. He peered more closely and was just able to discern something white protruding from the driver's window. It was a face—a face that he couldn't make out but somehow felt to be looking up for him.

DETECTIVERSE

OF VICE AND MEN

by JOHN LARGE

I spent a year of pensive time
In mapping out a perfect crime.
With lots of hard cerebral toil,
I burned up scads of midnight oil.
Determined to outdo the law,
I checked the plan for any flaw—
And, bolstering my will to kill,
I honed my homicidal skill.
So finally the day arrived
When I'd commit what I'd contrived—
But then I found to my dismay
The lucky stiff had passed away.

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

First-story author #680 Barbara C. Bullard wrote her first story (a western) at the age of ten. Her first submission to EQMM was ten years ago (take courage, all you others who aspire to these pages). She began full-time writing two years ago. She is married to a C.P.A. and has four children, two stepchildren, and three grandchildren. Her hobbies are travel and photography. "My pictures," she told us, "cover every available wall space in our home, oozing out into friends' homes and offices."

Mildred rose from her seat, her hand clutching the table knife. "Done? Is that what you learned in school? How can a person be 'done'? It is a physical impossibility—unless you intend to bake me like a cookie . . . !"

ARE YOU DONE?

by BARBARA C. BULLARD

"Are you done?"

Mildred raised her eyes to the waitress hovering at her elbow. The girl couldn't have been twenty-one, so Mildred considered letting it pass—she undoubtedly was just another product of the American school system. Mildred, however, couldn't help herself. She began to speak, her voice beginning at a low pitch but steadily rising.

"Done? Am I done? Do I look like a hamburger? Am I a steak? A cake? Done?"

The waitress began to back away, alarm on her face. What, she wondered, had gotten into the old broad?

Mildred rose from her seat, her hand clutching the table knife. "Done? Is that what you learned in school? How can a person be 'done'? It is a physical impossibility—unless you intend to bake me like a cookie!"

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The waitress turned, racing to get the manager. Let him handle this madwoman. (That's why he didn't wear the company uniform, but instead wore his very own lemon-yellow shirt topped by a red-hibiscus tie, apparently the only tie he owned.)

Mildred watched the girl flee, astonished at her own outburst. When had this obsession of hers turned violent?

For the greater part of her life, she had taught her children, her children's children, her children's friends, her children's children's friends, casual acquaintances, lovers (who soon became ex-lovers), husbands (who soon—but you get the picture) her pet phrase: "Cakes are done, people are finished."

Ultimately, each of Mildred's children reached the age where they had the courage to question an English teacher about the word "done," on the off-chance that their nutty parent might be in error. She had basked in her superiority when they returned home to admit that her statement was correct.

"You may have 'done' a task," the teachers had said, "but you cannot be 'done' yourself."

When the word "done" began to creep into newspapers and TV news written by people who should know better, Mildred gnashed her teeth.

Reading popular fiction became an occasion for throwing the book across the room. One night, watching a television movie, a period piece set in a time long ago when English was more often spoken correctly, one of the characters said, "When you are done—" and Mildred raged for hours.

Then came the night when Angela Lansbury, an English actress who should have known better, said, "When I'm done—" Mildred threw the magazine she had been half reading onto the screen. She tried making a resolution. She would simply ignore the proliferating misuse of the word. There must be other words being outrageously mangled. She could surely find one of them and leave "done" alone.

Soon after Mildred had made her resolution, and as if in answer to her need, her son returned home from school with his homework assignment. His teacher had assigned an essay on "If I Was a Fireman" (or whatever future occupation her son and his classmates were to choose). Mildred simmered through the evening. In the morning, she returned the assignment to the teacher, corrected in red ink to "If I Were." She had affixed a grade of D-minus for the

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teacher. It hadn't made her son very popular, but Mildred righteously didn't care.

After the was/were controversy kept her occupied for months, she spent a few weeks ranting over people who wrote "your" when they meant "you're," but soon she returned to her first love/obsession: "done."

And where had Mildred's half-century war gotten her? Into a booth in an antiseptic coffee shop, sipping tea and waiting for her blood pressure to return to normal.

She looked around the coffee shop. It was identical to every other in its chain in a hundred towns down to the identical plastic ferns. Why should she fault a waitress who didn't know better than to misuse the word "done"?

It wasn't, Mildred knew, the girl's fault. She had been badly taught at home and at school. In the larger scheme of things, Mildred consoled herself, it was of little importance.

Looking around, Mildred saw the eyes of the other customers slide away as she looked in their direction.

What, she asked herself, were they looking at? Pulling the compact from her handbag, she checked her reflection in the mirror. No, she didn't have a hunk of spinach between her front teeth. Putting the compact away, she rolled her eyes to the left, then the right. Whereupon she saw a field of giant red hibiscus standing in a field of lemons.

Refocusing her eyes, she looked at the ugliest tie ever sold to some unsuspecting man or his wife. "Yes?" She was proud of the coolness of her tone.

"Excuse me, Ma'am." The condescending tone that came back to her was suitable only for very small children, lunatics, and total incompetents. The hair at the back of Mildred's neck rose in retaliation.

"Are you—" The manager paused. If he could just get this crazy woman to leave without any further fuss, he thought. He didn't ask for much, but if he could ease her out of the restaurant before she started another scene she'd make his day. "I don't," he continued, "want to rush you, but if you're done--"

Later, when he was asked to speculate on what had happened, he was at a loss to explain.

"Alls I know," he said, "I'm all 'are you done?' Then she's all 'Done?

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Am I done? Do I look done?' Then she screams, I mean like I done hit her or something, and ups and runs out of the restaurant."

The television newswoman shook her head, perplexed. "Is that all she said? No hint as to the reason for her actions?"

"No. I don't unnerstand it myself. Man, I couldn't believe it. She ran out, didn't even pay for her lunch. Poor Bambi, she's the waitress, she'll have to pay the bill from her own tips, I guess. Anyway, the old woman was screaming and yelling when she ran out. I don't know, I guess she didn't see that big truck. Ran right out in the front of it."

Smiling for the camera, the newswoman turned her head slightly to show her best side. "There you are, a very odd and tragic happening here at Harold's House of Pancakes. Now, back to you, Tammy."

The camera's red light winked out and the smile faded. "Well," said the newswoman, "that's a wrap, guys. I'm done."

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A chilling story from the 1987 collection of short mystery fiction by Canadian writers, Cold Blood: Murder in Canada, *edited by Peter Sellers . . .*

CATSPAW

by SANDRA WOODRUFF

Died: Croft, Jane Gilberta. At her home, after a decline bravely borne. Survived by her great-nephew Alexander de Vries and her boys: Slyboots, Courtall, Crossbite, Ranger, Fainall, Vainlove, and Furpants. She will be missed. Orchids only, by request.

Wisteria Cottage
March 28
Dear Boy,

You will think me a morbid old woman, preoccupied with death. Do not. The thought is unworthy of you. I am alert and cheerful, as always. I write because Dr. McKillop informs me that after 83 years my heart is at last showing its age. "Tell me the worst, Doctor," I demanded. "I can take it." The man has no sense of cliche; he replied earnestly that I am failing. I deduce from his wafflings that I may linger and dwindle for a few more months or I may suddenly "pop off," as the saying goes. Accordingly, I am setting my affairs in order. My obituary is enclosed. Insert it in the quality papers, *The Globe and Mail* and *The Times*, I think, exactly as it stands. I have omitted my age because I have no wish to satisfy the appetite of the curious and because an unexpected feeling I can only describe as superstitious awe prevents me from anticipating the time of my own death.

I have also made my will. Since you are my only living relative, it is a simple one. As you know, I have a strong sense of family obligation and an aversion to dividing property unnecessarily. I have appointed you and my solicitor, Mr. Swaine, as my executors. His firm handled your trust fund from me and your inheritance from your parents. At Mr. Swaine's excellent suggestion I have added a codicil to my will giving full legal force to any letters describing

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specific bequests which are found in my possession at the time of my death. These I can alter as I choose without consulting anyone. When the time comes, you will find them in the top left-hand drawer of my desk.

Believe me, it is important to attend to these matters. However distasteful they seem to you young people, be reassured that they do not unduly distress

Your affectionate aunt,
Gilberta Croft

Aunt Gilberta's letter knocked me for a loop. Don't get me wrong. I'm used to getting letters from her. Though she lives only fifteen miles from me, she refuses to use the telephone. She claims it makes communication too ephemeral. I thought nothing she did could surprise me any more, but finding her obituary in my mail Monday morning was something else.

Aunt Gilberta took me over when my parents were killed in a car accident fourteen years ago. I was twelve. She had just been widowed, and there was no one else to have me, really. "I owe it to your poor dead mother," she said at the time. My parents always made a big thing of accepting people as they are. They had a poster that said *Dare To Be Different* over the kitchen stove. So Aunt Gilberta seemed ordinary by my standards, but my friends all thought she was a hoot.

Take the cats, for example. Every stray tomcat that wandered by got fed, neutered, and adopted as one of her boys, just like that. I'm not even sure they were all homeless to begin with. We named them together, one by one. I remember Aunt G. taking it very seriously.

"I've been doing research on the theory of cat naming," she announced. "Many people, it seems, name their cats after the nobility out of a misplaced wish for social status. Not I. My cat names must call well. The sound of the call is all important, never forget, dear boy." She had a point. "Here, Furpants" echoing on the night air is memorable. I ought to know—I had to do the calling.

In the evenings she read "the great comedies" aloud, to make me civilized—though she always regretted that she got me too late to do the job properly. We worked our way through Congreve, Sheridan, Feydeau, and her favorite Mr. Wilde and Mr. Coward. One Feydeau night she slammed the book shut in the middle of Act One and said, out of the blue, "Your Uncle Henry was always unfaithful to me. I

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can never forgive him for showing me that infidelity is not funny. It has quite spoiled my enjoyment of bedroom farce."

She really talks like that. Dear boy, she always calls me. I protested at that once. "But, dear boy," she answered, "I don't like your name. My niece called you Alexander against my wishes, to please my sister, so you shall be 'dear boy' or possibly 'dear' to me. You *are* a dear boy," she smiled, patting my hand.

She wanted me to be a lawyer, but took it pretty well when I dropped out of law school and went into the property-development business. I buy houses, fix them up, and sell them at a profit. Actually, Aunt G. gave me the money to buy the first houses I restored. "Seed money, dear boy," she breezed, "but from now on you must make your own way." The old girl has been good to me by her lights. After her epistolary bombshell, I decided a visit would be a good idea.

Aunt Gilberta lives in chintz-lined seclusion at the edge of Oakes' Corners, a village about eighty miles east of Toronto. Her house is an ordinary Ontario Victorian brick cottage, but you'd never know it. The little white gate, the hedges, the lane with the church at the bottom of the hill all look like Olde England. Aunt G. has preserved herself from the least taint of Canadianism since her family came out from England sixty years ago. She still carries on the lifestyle of her Edwardian country girlhood. Actually, I think she makes up her girlhood as she goes along.

I have to say that the visit was like all our visits. Aunt Gilberta was very much herself. As usual, I knocked and let myself in. She called from the living room, with Furpants (fat and striped) on her lap and Crossbite (lean and black) on the back of her wing chair.

"Hello, dear boy," she greeted me. "Does the house smell of cat?" This is Aunt Gilberta's usual greeting.

"No, Aunt G., it smells of lavender and hyacinths," I answered truthfully as she presented her cheek to be kissed. We have played this scene many times before.

"Good," she replied, right on cue. "In my childhood, of course, the best houses smelled of dogs and damp. It was a mark of social distinction. Cat is merely common."

I quickly changed the subject. "Where is Mrs. Nelles today?" Mrs. Nelles, apart from the fact that her stout dignity prevents any such term, is a dogsbody. She cooks, cleans, and copes with the daily round. She also keeps her distance.

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"She is out, dear boy." Aunt Gilberta sounded huffy. "She now requires two afternoons off a week instead of one whole day. It is most inconvenient, but she claims that I shouldn't be left alone for too long any more. In case," she added darkly in a faithful imitation of Mrs. Nelles' gloom. She brightened again. "We can talk after tea."

By talk, of course, she meant a discussion of her decline. We canvassed the subject thoroughly. Aunt G. was obviously hedging her bets. She was determined to prove her doctor wrong while at the same time obeying his instructions for babying her heart. Trips upstairs were rationed but walks to the post office permitted. As further justification for these daily trips, she trotted out one of her maxims: "Never put temptation in an inferior's way." I could imagine temptations, but not in Aunt G.'s mail.

She absolutely insisted on what she calls arranging her affairs herself.

"You will be glad I have planned carefully when the time comes," was all she would say. She had never shown the least interest in things financial before. I've certainly tried to talk about my business with her often enough. Whenever I've mentioned money she has cut me off with an Aunt Gilbertaism: "I am too well off to understand finances myself, I'm thankful to say. Concern for money becomes a man, I agree. On a woman, it is loud, like tartan trousers." There is no way to answer a thing like that.

I tried to rouse her a bit as I was leaving, partly because she had me worried, partly because it dawned on me that if Aunt G. got really sick she might become my full-time responsibility. I didn't know if I could handle it.

"You know, Aunt," I said, "you should try to meet more people. Otherwise, you'll begin to brood. Find yourself a nice young man to take your mind off your troubles." If she were the rib-elbowing kind I would have elbowed her in the ribs.

I was flabbergasted to receive another letter a week later.

Wisteria Cottage
April 3
Dear Boy,

You will be glad to know that I have taken your advice and have made a new friend, a young man named Alvin Ferrars. He is one of the Dundas Ferrars, I knew his grandfather. While I was arranging my affairs, it occurred to me that I might offer the art gallery one or two of those Sickerts that your Uncle Henry collected

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so devotedly. They are dreary things, but enjoying a vogue again, I believe. I wish to donate them now but not have them delivered until after my death. Mr. Ferrars sees to acquisitions for the gallery. He was thrilled to the marrow at my generous offer, he said. In many ways, Mr. Ferrars reminds me of your uncle when he was young. He so loves beautiful things, though he cannot see them without wanting to save them, hoard them, I might almost say. He was quite distressed at finding my small Turkoman rug by the front door in the path of dirty feet, and he actually became flustered about Courtall's blue dish. It seems that it is the best kind of carnival glass and very collectible. This seems extraordinary. Carnival glass is not what I would call good, collectible or not. As you know, I have always been one for enjoying my things, not pussyfooting around them. Courtall is particularly fond of his dish. I am sure he wouldn't drink his tea out of anything else. It was a pleasure to talk to such a cultured and considerate young man. Vainlove quite took to him, too, and you know how particular he is. The time flew. Fortunately, he will need to come again to complete the arrangements—evaluations, gift forms, and so forth. I hope you will visit soon, dear boy. I don't see enough of you.

Your affectionate aunt,
Gilberta Croft

She may not see enough of me, but when I did stop by for a few minutes later in the week to say that I would be away for a while, she hardly spared me a thought. It was Mr. Ferrars said this and Mr. Ferrars did that and Mr. Ferrars made such a hit with all the cats, not only with Vainlove the particular but with Ranger, who never sits on laps but sat on Mr. Ferrars' lap, who didn't even mind when he shed white hairs all over his trousers. By the time I left, I was fairly fed up with Mr. Ferrars.

The next month was incredibly hectic. I was away on business more or less continuously. Actually, the business had hit a bad patch. In my line, cash flow is everything. You have to buy at a good time and sell at the right time or you're in trouble. A sale that I had been counting on fell through and I needed to raise money right away. A loan from Aunt Gilberta would tide me over, but I didn't have any real hope of one. The few times I've wanted to borrow money from her before, she has resisted pretty firmly—refused outright, to be frank.

"You cannot expect me to pay for what I cannot approve" or a

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version thereof is her standard response. She's getting her own back at me for quitting law school, I guess. It's maddening, actually. Anyway, I was tired and strung out when I got home. I put down my suitcase and stooped to pick up a month's worth of mail from the hall carpet (industrial-quality grey tweed, made to withstand dirty feet). Right on top of the pile was a letter from Aunt Gilberta on her usual thick creamy paper.

Wisteria Cottage
May 4
Dear Alexander,

I hope you have concluded your business satisfactorily. In my experience, most men, even your Uncle Henry I regret to say, choose to put their work before their families and friends. It is almost a mark of masculinity. My dear Alvin is such a refreshing change; he puts the proper value on home life, friendship, and pleasant surroundings. The dear boy has been kind enough to say that my house feels like home to him. I have come to rely on him so much during your absence, particularly as I have had one or two worrying turns.

Mrs. Nelles continues to insist on her two free afternoons each week. She is quite obdurate on the subject. I must confess to feeling a shade nervous that she might leave me altogether if I were to forbid her outings. When he can, Alvin arranges his afternoons off to coincide with hers and spends them with me. He works queer hours at the gallery and is often free during the day. He is such a comfort to me. I have made him some small gifts to show my gratitude—just a silver salt cellar, Georgian your uncle always claimed, and a small porcelain dish, Meissen I believe. He was so delighted and so modest. "Don't think of giving me anything," he protested. "Leave me some small memento if you like, but nothing more." "Don't worry, dear boy," I told him, "you will be remembered in my will." Of course, I have made some alteration in my will now that I know him. The letter with instructions is in my desk with the others. Come to see me if you can spare the time.

Your aunt,
Gilberta Croft

On top of everything else, this letter made me really angry. That putting-work-before-family crack was cheap. It was obvious that young Alvin Ferrars of the Dundas Ferrars—damn Aunt Gilberta's mania about good families—didn't put anything before himself. Don't think of giving me anything, my eye. He couldn't wait to get

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his hands on Aunt G.'s money—my money, as a matter of fact. I couldn't for the life of me think of what, but I knew I'd have to do something about him.

I didn't have to, however. Young Alvin overplayed his hand, the dear boy. I spent a restless few days after my trip clearing up the backlog of paperwork and trying to persuade the bank manager to give me a bridging loan. He wouldn't hear of it. He not only refused, he refused in the managerial way. "Your business is already overextended and your prospects, quite frankly, are very insecure," he said. "It wouldn't be prudent for us to lend you further monies at this time. Don't hesitate to approach us again if you can demonstrate some really solid prospects."

With one thing and another, I hadn't had a chance to visit Aunt Gilberta and I didn't much feel like it, either. I knew that I would have to go soon and at least ask her to lend me the money. I wasn't looking forward to it. Just as I finally psyched myself up to do it, I got another letter from her, in very shaky handwriting. I hardly recognized it.

Wisteria Cottage
May 9
Dear Boy,

Please come to see me very soon. That fool Dr. McKillop wanted to ring you when I was very low, but I refused. The idea of a quasi-deathbed scene offends me. However, I have important matters to discuss with you. I am afraid that I have been badly mistaken in Alvin Ferrars. He is not the innocent lover of beauty that I supposed. He is regrettably acquisitive, and I fear that mention of some small bequest—you know that I remembered him in my will—has made him greedy. Indeed, he looked at me quite fiercely the other day when he came to call. His eyes fairly glittered. I fear that he had designs on my life. I blame myself in part. I have broken my own rule and put temptation in his way. I have asked him not to come again. Do not desert

Your affectionate aunt,
Gilberta Croft

Things were obviously getting serious. Either that creep Ferrars was dangerous or Aunt G. had really flipped out this time. It was Thursday, one of Mrs. Nelles' afternoons off, so I went over right after lunch to have it out with her privately. I was fuming. Spring was in its golden phase, the time of year I usually like best, so to

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calm down I drove over the back way, through open country, and down her lane from the top of the hill.

About halfway there, it hit me like a ton of bricks that the simplest solution to all my problems (hers, too, for that matter) was to kill Aunt Gilberta myself. At first the thought made me so queasy I had to stop the car. I couldn't believe I could even consider such a thing. I mean, she had raised me, after a fashion, though she didn't hesitate to abandon me for Ferrars when it suited her. Finally, I got hold of myself well enough to drive on, but I still felt unreal when I arrived.

I went in at the side door. She must have heard the car because she was standing on the upstairs landing clutching a shabby housecoat around her. She looked really feeble.

We got off on the wrong footing right away. For one thing, she kept us standing in the upstairs hall. She looked ready to keel over, but she wouldn't lie down and she wouldn't sit. There were no greetings, no social niceties. All she wanted to talk about was the ingratitude of Alvin. That was fine—I didn't have a good word to say for him, either.

Warming to her theme, she went on to my own ingratitude: a) for not warning her of the evil in Alvin's heart; b) for not paying enough attention to her myself; and c) combining her grievances—for going away and leaving her in Alvin's clutches. She was completely unreasonable. I should have just left and come back later. I knew it was no time to ask her for a loan, but I was desperate. I had only until Friday evening to raise the money and she was my only chance. Besides, other times I'd waited for the best moment to ask and it didn't make any difference. I just wanted to get it over with.

She didn't take it well. I would almost have welcomed one of her chilly little pronouncements. What I got was pure fishwife at top volume. I didn't know she had it in her. The gist was that she wouldn't lend me money, now or ever. We were all the same, Uncle Henry, Alvin, and I. We had all betrayed her and used her.

At first, I tried to soothe her down, though I was pretty upset myself. She was practically hysterical. I even tried to joke with her that a lady always controls her temper. That was a mistake. She called me shallow and utterly lacking in sensitivity. Finally I lost my temper, too. I started to shout.

"You can't stand anyone getting the better of you, can you, Aunt? You've always laid down the law and doled out favors to other people. You don't know anything about being dependent on another person's whims. How do you think I feel asking for money I need badly and

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being treated like something sub-human? Do you think I enjoy it? Look at me! You've only given me what you thought I should have, not what I wanted. I'm not a person to you, I'm a puppet. You're not interested in me for myself. Actually, you're not interested in anyone—you just want to control people. You're selfish and tyrannical and bogus. Without your eternal posing you're nothing!" By this time I was beginning to feel better. I had done a lot of holding in over the years.

I was just starting to calm down when she smiled. She actually smiled. She was laughing at me. I felt a surge of pure rage. I reached out and shook her. I could have gone on and on doing it, just to see the pretense ooze out of her, but she wrenched away from me. She fell backward down the stairs and lay in a little heap at the bottom. One hand was reaching out to save herself, the other was still clutching her old housecoat, as if I might try to take it from her.

The first thing I thought when I saw her lying there was that she never was a good listener. The second was that she was dead and I had killed her.

I checked for a heartbeat just in case, but of course there wasn't any. My knees started to shake so much I had to sit on a step. The shouting must have disturbed Ranger, the big white cat, because he came out of the living room and, ignoring Aunt Gilberta, sat on my lap. I don't know what Aunt G. was on about—he'll sit on any lap going.

Suddenly I became cool and clearheaded, sitting there with a cat on my lap and Aunt Gilberta heaped below us in her housecoat. I looked at my watch. I had been in the house fifteen minutes.

I was about to call the doctor to say that I had found Aunt Gilberta dead, but I decided that would be asking for trouble. He would know right away that she had just died. There was no way I could explain to him what really happened—he wouldn't understand. So I decided to wait until Mrs. Nelles found Aunt G. that evening. Even if somebody saw me come to the house, by then she would have been dead long enough that a few minutes wouldn't matter one way or another. The obvious thing was to leave quickly. But I had to get rid of the letter to Alvin Ferrars first.

The letters were, as Aunt Gilberta had directed, in the top left-hand drawer of her desk. The Alvin letter was right at the back. It was short: "To Alvin, in gratitude for your attentions to an old woman, I leave you Courtall's blue dish, the one you have admired

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so often. I ask only that you substitute an ordinary blue glass dish for it. Courtall is fond of blue."

I could have laughed out loud—a dish, a piece of junk. Poor sod, all that effort wasted. For a moment I didn't even begrudge him the Georgian silver. In a burst of good will I put the letter back.

I left quietly a minute later. No one saw me. When Mrs. Nelles phoned to tell me the news, I managed to summon convincing surprise and grief. I made the funeral arrangements with my usual efficiency and placed the obituary in the quality papers, as instructed. Aunt Gilberta was to be buried on Monday.

The waiting time was terrible. It felt just like when my parents died. I've heard Aunt G. say a million times, "You are my only living relative, dear boy," and she was my only living relative, too. But I never really thought about what it meant. Now I know. It means that I am completely alone. I have friends, sure, but nobody who goes back all that far or who really cares about me. I told myself it was all for the best. Aunt G. couldn't have lasted much longer, the way she was looking. Even if she had really declined for any length of time (obituary or no obituary), she would have hated it.

I can't deny that I was relieved that my future was looking better. I took the risk of phoning the bank manager on Friday morning and arranging the bridging loan. I was a bit hasty, I know, but I had to be. Word had evidently gotten out, because he spread his oily charm all over me. Overnight, I had become a valued client. He had the gall to offer his condolences on the loss of my aunt and to congratulate me on my now secure prospects in the same breath.

After the funeral, at which there was no sign of Alvin Ferrars, I returned to Mr. Swaine's office with him to discuss the will. Mr. Swaine was tall, thin, and solemn. Whether he was always mournful or whether I was seeing his funeral manner I couldn't decide. He wasted no time in chat.

"Your aunt gave me to understand that you were familiar with the general tenor of her will," he began. "As you know, we are her executors. We shall discuss arrangements in due course, but for now Mrs. Croft left a letter for you, with instructions that you be left alone to read it." With that, he handed me a bulky cream envelope and beat a stately retreat.

I was surprised, but not worried. A letter from beyond the grave was a very Aunt Gilberta touch. It did give me a shock to see her

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handwriting firm again, though, as if she had been revitalized. The letter was dated six weeks earlier. It read:

Dear Boy,

By the time you read this, you will have killed me. You are surprised that I know when you may not even have formulated a plan for my removal. Indeed, I am not so callous as to expect malice aforethought from you, but in the end it will come to the same thing. Eliminating an ailing, possibly burdensome relative will begin to seem the expedient course, and you have always been fond of expediency.

I must confess prematurely, since I am unlikely to have a deathbed for confession, that I, too, have taken the line of least resistance. My death was not murder, but suicide at arm's length. I have been dreading the prospect of lingering death. I do not precisely relish the prospect of death at all, but given the choice I prefer quick to slow. Accordingly, I have been issuing little challenges to my heart, to no avail. An extra trip or two upstairs each day, the walk uphill from the post office, a laughable attempt to skip, even. I have survived all these.

I have, therefore, been obliged to enlist your help. You are my only living relative, and this is a familiar matter. I have decided to arrange an argument with you. You are slow to anger, but when it does erupt your temper is violent. I shall await a suitable occasion, then provoke you until you retaliate. With angry words? With an actual blow? A push downstairs? It is best that I do not know. I shall put temptation in your way and rely on you and my faint heart to do the rest. If my resolution does not falter, this scheme may even add some interest to days increasingly barren of it.

I have one other confession. To further my plan, I have practiced a small deception. I have implied strongly (though I did not lie outright—I never lie) that you would be my heir. This is not really the case. I am leaving you no money. Under the circumstances, it would not be good for your character to profit from my death. Moreover, I am a woman of strong family feeling. It has been my principle that my dear ones should be well looked after in my lifetime and not be obliged to wait until my death for financial benefit. The provisions I have already made for you and the inheritance you have from your parents should, with care, keep you comfortably. Your wildcat schemes are your own concern. You are so clever with money, dear boy. I have had the pleasure of seeing you established in life and of having discharged my responsibility to you as your only

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relative. I am leaving you my pink lustre teaset to remember our afternoon teas together. Do not neglect afternoon tea. It is a meal for children and the upper classes.

As my executor, you are entitled to a small fee. This fee is a convention merely; my will is an undemanding one. You know where my letters are. All of my property—the house and contents and my capital—I leave for the care of the cats. Mrs. Nelles will stay on in the house at her present salary, with increments at your discretion. Should she leave, you must find a suitable replacement at once. Spare no trouble or expense. The cats must stay in their own home until the last one dies. They are so very attached to the house. Fainall would pine anywhere else and Slyboots is not as robust as he might be.

Ultimately, the house and contents should be sold and the proceeds donated to the British Anti-Vivisection Society, a group I have long supported. They have an office in Harley Street. Look after my boys as I would, and as they grow old see that they have the best veterinary care. Under no circumstances are they to be put down. Their deaths will not benefit you and in general I am against killing. I sign myself this last time,

Your affectionate aunt,
Gilberta Croft

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a *NEW* Black Widowers story by

ISAAC ASIMOV

Gonzalo interrupted. "Pardon me, Marcellus, I don't want you to take offense, but we have all heard of the Amazing Randi. I have, for one. But I have never heard of you." He looked about. "Has anyone? I mean, besides Jeff?"

"I hope not," said DaRienzi with deep sincerity. "I said I keep a low profile and I mean it. I don't want anyone *to know me in my capacity as a psychic researcher. That Jeff knows is partly the result of accident, but I am confident of his discretion. And I* hope *that—" He looked about uncertainly.*

Jeff said, "As I told you, Marcellus, nothing that is said at a Black Widowers banquet is ever repeated outside these walls."

Black Widowers story #65! With the Doctor's fifth collection, Puzzles of the Black Widowers, *recently published by Doubleday . . .*

THE HAUNTED CABIN

by ISAAC ASIMOV

Geoffrey Avalon, host of the Black Widower banquet that month, gazed benignly at the five other seated Widowers, and at his guest for the evening, Marcellus DaRienzi. Henry, that unparalleled waiter, would soon be removing the main-course plates, when the last bit of the roast goose, red cabbage, and potato pancakes would be gone.

"I have a rather odd tale that I would like to tell you all before the business end of the meeting begins," Avalon said in his stately baritone.

Emmanuel Rubin looked up at him owlishly through the thick

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lenses of his glasses with an unaccustomed bonhomie, and patted a stomach full of goose. "Go ahead, Jeff, but don't be tedious."

"I shall try not to be," said Avalon gravely. "It happened two weeks ago. I was on a business trip and had taken a room in a hotel. I needn't mention the name of the hotel, or of the city, to avoid tedium for Manny, and because they have nothing to do with the story. My wife was not with me. That *is* essential.

"I had several hours one afternoon between appointments and I thought I might as well take a nap." He added defensively, "I don't know about the rest of you, but since I am past my first youth I find forty winks after lunch to be most helpful."

"We'll grant you that, Jeff," said Thomas Trumbull, scowling under the crisp, tight waves of his white hair. "I've been known to take such naps myself, and Jim Drake is taking one now."

"Not at all," said Drake indignantly, "I was just resting my eyelids."

"Let me go on," said Avalon. "I fell into a light doze and suddenly felt the poke of a finger on my shoulder, quite a hard poke. Naturally, I woke up at once and, in the confusion of sudden wakefulness, I cried out, "Who? What?" and sat up in bed. The room, as I suppose you can guess, was, except for me, empty. It was afternoon, the sunlight was slanting in—there were no dim corners, all was bright, and the room was empty. The door was securely locked, with an inner chain in place. The windows were locked and they were, in any case, sixteen sheer stories above the street."

"Did you look under the bed?" asked Mario Gonzalo, grinning and smoothing his ascot tie.

"No," said Avalon with a touch of hauteur, "I did *not* look under the bed. There was no room under the bed for a medium-sized dog, let alone a human being. However, I did inspect the bathroom and the closet. Nothing there. And there were no connecting doors to other rooms, by the way. I was alone, absolutely alone."

"So?" said Roger Halsted, pushing away his plate.

"So who poked me?"

"Oh, for God's sake," exploded Trumbull. "It was a *dream*. Haven't you ever dreamed, Jeff?"

"No," said Avalon, hunching his formidable eyebrows low, "it was *not* a dream. I *know* it was not a dream. Someone poked me."

"Listen," began Trumbull, "I've had dreams—"

"Never mind your dreams," said Avalon with unaccustomed abruptness, "this was not a dream."

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Trumbull shook his head. "I've never known you to be this stubborn, Jeff, and this stupid."

The guest, DaRienzi, now spoke for the first time since the dinner had begun. He smiled down at his stewed pears and said, "What Jeff is doing here, gentlemen, is posing a locked-room puzzle. Something has happened in a locked room that could not have happened. My friend Jeff is an honest man who is presenting an honest problem and we—or at least you gentlemen of the club—must puzzle out the solution. And saying it was just a dream is not an acceptable solution, is it, Jeff?"

"No," said Avalon, still testy. "*I* know the solution, and so do you, Marcellus, because I told you this earlier in the evening, but I want the Black Widowers to figure it out. I'm telling it to them in orderly fashion, if the idiots would only allow it."

Rubin said, "You're the host, Jeff—you control the evening. Order silence and go on."

Avalon glowered. "Silence! In the empty room, then, I was forced to consider the possibility of a supernatural warning."

The five other Widowers at the table, rationalists all, scrambled to their feet and, the order for silence forgotten, yammered their indignation. DaRienzi kept his seat and smiled.

Avalon raised his hands and thundered, "*Silence!* I don't say I accepted the supernatural as an explanation. I merely say I was forced to consider it. I don't believe in supernatural influences, but even my own firmest beliefs cannot be accepted by myself as unshakeable and invulnerable. Do you mind pursuing rationality that far?"

"As a matter of fact," said Roger Halsted quietly, as he mopped his high pink brow with his handkerchief, "our society is so permeated and drenched with supernatural beliefs of any number of kinds and sorts that even the firmest skeptic may be corrupted, at least momentarily, if the conditions are right."

"Thank you, Roger," said Avalon. "It's exactly what I would have wanted to say. It was two-fifteen when it happened, and if it hadn't been for the fact that I had a wife in New York I would have dismissed the matter. But I couldn't. Some forty-five years of marriage isn't something you can dismiss lightly. I phoned her. She answered at once. I don't know what I would have done if she hadn't answered—if she had been out shopping, for instance. I might well have raced home and made a complete fool of myself. But she *did* answer. I asked how things were and everything was perfectly in

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order, so I relaxed. And that left only the primary problem. Who had poked me?"

"It was a dream!" said Trumbull stubbornly.

"No," said Avalon. "It *wasn't*. After a while, I gave up the problem and decided to try to sleep again. And I became aware that when I prepare for sleep, at least if I'm alone in bed, I wrap my arms tightly about myself. I also know that in the borderland between sleep and wakefulness, my muscles twitch. I have felt them do so and my wife has commented on it with some amusement.

"And of course, that was the solution. It fully explains the locked-room puzzle without calling upon the supernatural. In the process of falling asleep, my own finger had twitched and jabbed my shoulder."*

Avalon looked about triumphantly and said, "And that is why I have brought my friend, Marcellus DaRienzi, Ph.D., as my guest. He has a natural connection with this sort of thing. And I have managed to finish my story without delaying the grilling too much, so let's proceed. Tom, you skeptic, I appoint you the griller."

Thomas Trumbull studied Avalon's guest. DaRienzi was a cheerful-looking man with tufts of hair down his cheeks and only a tuft on top of his head. He wore old-fashioned round-rimmed glasses and a vest under his suit-jacket, and he had an air of permeating benevolence.

Trumbull said, "Mr. DaRienzi—Marcellus—I will get right to the point without setting you the usual first task of justifying your existence. What is the so-called natural connection Jeff says you have with this mad dream-story he told us?"

Avalon looked offended, but kept silent.

DaRienzi said mildly, "The connection, I suppose, is that I'm a psychic researcher."

"Oh, Lord," muttered Trumbull, "oh, Lord." Then, more loudly, "Does that mean you're trying to prove the existence of telepathy, spoon-bending, ghosts, and fairies at the bottom of the garden? Have you been working on poor Jeff so that he's beginning to be screwed up?"

Avalon looked daggers, but still said nothing.

DaRienzi said, "Why, no, Tom, rather the opposite. I've spent my

**The reader may be interested to know that this matter of a poke in an empty room, and a panicky call to a wife, happened to me recently in exactly the manner described here.—I.A.*

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time investigating and *disproving* reports of the existence of telepathy, spoon-bending, ghosts, and fairies at the bottom of the garden."

"Do you mean," put in Rubin suddenly, "like the Amazing Randi?"

"Something like," agreed DaRienzi, "but not completely. The Amazing Randi is probably the most doughty knight in the fight against hokum and pseudoscience that there is. But he is much in the news and the practitioners of nonsense try to avoid him, so that his task is harder than it might otherwise be.

"I'm not the skilled magician that Randi is, which puts me under a disadvantage. However, I maintain a low profile. I stay out of the limelight so that I am easily accepted as a believer and the fakers don't go to any special efforts to fool me. For that reason, I can usually detect what it is they're really doing. I might say that I have never found any convincing evidence in favor of anything we might call supernaturalism or the paranormal. I'm ready to be convinced that such things exist, but only if the evidence is solid, and it never has been in my experience."

"In that case," said Trumbull, "I presume you don't approve of Avalon's action in calling his wife."

"It did no harm," said DaRienzi. "His momentary weakness in phoning his wife is something any of us might have fallen prey to. As Roger said, the social milieu in which we live makes it almost impossible not to weaken on occasion. And I surely approve of Jeff's final rationalistic solution of this locked-room mystery of his."

Gonzalo interrupted, "Pardon me, Marcellus, I don't want you to take offense, but we have all heard of the Amazing Randi. I have, for one. But I have never heard of you." He looked about. "Has anyone? I mean, besides Jeff?"

"I hope not," said DaRienzi with deep sincerity. "I said I keep a low profile and I mean it. I don't want *anyone* to know me in my capacity as a psychic researcher. That Jeff knows is partly the result of accident, but I am confident of his discretion. And I *hope* that—" He looked about uncertainly.

Jeff said, "As I told you, Marcellus, nothing that is said at a Black Widowers banquet is ever repeated outside these walls. That assurance extends to our waiter, who is, in point of fact, a member of the club."

"Well," said DaRienzi with a remnant of worry in his voice, "I'll accept that."

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Halsted cleared his throat and said, "Marcellus, what is your doctorate in?"

"Psychology."

"And do you work as a psychologist? Do you have a university position? Are you in private practice?"

"No to all three questions, Roger. My work consists entirely of the psychic research I've mentioned."

Halsted cleared his throat again and said, "I'm a math teacher at a junior-high school and am therefore very knowledgeable on the subject of inadequate payment. How the devil do you make a living on your psychic research?"

"I don't," said DaRienzi. "At least, I don't have to. My father saw to it that I was left with a secure and entirely adequate income so that I can quite afford to spend my life in doing something I consider very worthwhile and interesting, without regard to payment."

"Lucky fellow," muttered Halsted.

Trumbull reentered the grilling with what was almost a roar. "All right, so you don't need money. But do you mean to tell us that you have no hankering for fame, or at least recognition? Don't you want to have people know of your work?"

DaRienzi reddened slightly. "Why, there, Tom," he said, "you touch a tender point. We live in a social environment whose orientation toward success is as corrupting as its orientation toward supernaturalism. The truth is—and please let me remind you of your assurance of confidentiality—that I *am* writing a book describing my experiences. It will be a startling one and I have many amusing stories to tell that are not at all known to the general public. I don't suppose it will make a great deal of money—debunking books never do. Still, I have a publisher and I'm enjoying the task."

"But you'll blow your cover," said Gonzalo. "I mean, you'll become known and then you'll have the disadvantages of that."

"Scarcely," said DaRienzi with a small laugh. "My picture won't appear in the book and I plan to use a pseudonym. Any success I achieve in the book will rebound to the work I've done and not to me personally. Of course, as I approach the end of my life I may reveal my identity if a hankering for any personal fame I can garner in this way overcomes me."

"What progress are you making on your book?" asked Rubin. "Writing isn't an easy job."

"Manny knows," put in Gonzalo at once. "He's a writer and it surely doesn't come easy to him."

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"You'll find," said Rubin loftily, "that writers have much to suffer at the hands of ignorant and captious critics. But what progress are you making?"

"As Mario said, writing isn't easy, at least not for me, but I'm almost finished with the first draft. I made major progress late last summer when I was able to use a friend's Vermont home for two weeks. You remember, Jeff, that Harry Weinstein had to spend most of the summer in Europe and he was kind enough to let me have his summer home for the latter part of August. It was very peaceful and quiet, and perfect for what I needed.

"As a matter of fact, he had a special bonus for me. 'You'll like my place, Marcellus,' he said, 'because I've heard a haunted cabin has turned up in the vicinity, and you once said you were interested in such things.'

"And so I had. Such remarks do manage to slip out despite anything I can do. I've often thought it would be an accumulation of such slips that would blow my cover, to use Mario's phrase, and not my book."

Halsted asked, with interest, "Have you investigated haunted houses?"

"Certainly," said DaRienzi. "Half a dozen rather well known cases, and a number of trivial ones."

"How do you go about it?"

"You examine the place rather meticulously by daylight, but the important test is to spend the night there. A dark and stormy night would be best—" DaRienzi grinned "—but unfortunately the condition of most haunted houses is such that a stormy night would produce as much rain and wind indoors as outdoors."

Halsted said, "And you've actually slept in such houses?"

"Of course." DaRienzi looked about good-humoredly. "Come, you're all rationalists. I heard you jumping all over poor Jeff a while ago. How many of you would prefer *not* to sleep in a supposed haunted house?"

There was a rather sticky silence as the Black Widowers stared furtively at each other.

DaRienzi waited a moment, then said lightly, "I withdraw the question. Everyone has seen enough haunted-house movies in childhood to scar the soul of even the boldest."

"But," said Halsted, "do you actually sleep in these houses?"

"Of course not," said DaRienzi. "You simply spend the night there. After all, you have to stay awake if you're going to be aware of any

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manifestations. Besides that, the condition of haunted houses is not generally conducive to sleep. The houses are old and full of creaks, the rooms are musty, the beds rickety, and the mattresses beneath contempt. I doubt that anyone, even a posturing daredevil, could actually sleep in one of your typical haunted houses unless he was in the last stages of extreme fatigue."

"I don't suppose you ever came across any manifestations."

"If you mean anything that could be counted as firm evidence of ghostly or paranormal activity, of course not. The true believers always maintain that the manifestations are best received by 'sensitives' and that skeptics are too coarse-fibered to receive the delicate vibrations or whatever. That, however, is only another way of saying that manifestations are received most easily by people who are credulous and suggestible, and we all know that.

"Sometimes, to be sure, manifestations take place that are apparent even to my coarse-fibered, skeptical nature, and then I must nail them firmly to natural causes. I'm usually able to do that, but once I almost failed and I was then in the position Jeff found himself in when he was poked in the hotel room."

"Ah," said Gonzalo with sudden satisfaction. "Now you're talking. Tell us about it."

"I intend to," said DaRienzi, "because it happened last August in the little town in Vermont where I was using my friend's summer home."

"You mean," said Gonzalo, "there *was* a haunted cabin there, as your friend had said."

"Yes, there was, and it gave me quite a turn."

Avalon looked surprised. "You didn't tell me this, Marcellus."

"No, I had no occasion to, but after you told me your locked-room experience this afternoon, and I could see it was your reason for inviting me to the banquet, I thought it would be fitting to tell the story, since it matched yours so well."

"Very well, then. Tell it from the beginning, Marcellus."

"Certainly," said DaRienzi. "I drove there the evening before my formal occupancy was to begin and moved my baggage into the house. I was observed by some of the locals as I drove there, but they showed no curiosity. Harry loaned out his cottage for periods of time nearly every summer, and apparently the locals were used to the succession of 'city fellows' that came there. Besides, the locals kept themselves to themselves, as I found out. They were stolid and quiet, quite like the stereotype of the Vermont backwoodsman. They

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showed absolutely no interest in me socially, and that, as you can well imagine, was exactly what I wanted.

"I found the cottage in good shape—electricity on, water flowing, a gas range in working order, a comfortably large refrigerator-freezer—but nothing to eat, if you don't count a half empty tin of coffee in the pantry. That was no problem, of course. The next morning, I drove down to the village store about three-quarters of a mile away and stocked up with two weeks of supplies. I did so rather munificently, getting rather more than I needed, because I intended to leave some items in Weinstein's freezer as a sort of rent for the cottage. The storekeeper scared up almost everything I asked for.

"I then spent what I can only describe as a delicious two weeks working on my book, with my papers, notes, and reference materials scattered about me. No one disturbed me, and the weather, except for one dreary day of rain and wind, was fine. When the time came to leave, I was quite regretful."

Gonzalo said, "Don't leave yet. What about the haunted cabin?"

"I'm getting to that. Each evening, except for the rainy one, I'd walk to the village and back, partly for exercise, and partly to buy perishables. I exchanged a few remarks on the weather with any locals I met and they replied noncommittally. They were polite, if not communicative. *Except* in the matter of the haunted cabin. There they unbent as far as a Vermonter could unbend.

"They were willing to point out its location, for instance. I asked them what the haunting consisted of. They didn't know, or wouldn't say. Apparently 'city fellows' had occasionally spent time in the cabin and one old local man said he had heard tell that strange noises and sounds could be heard in the cabin.

"I was suspicious of the whole deal but did my best not to show it. For one thing, the cabin was old but not *very* old. It was not in a dilapidated state. For another, there were no stories to account for the haunting and I considered that very odd. Your haunted house invariably comes with a dark tale of lust, cruelty, murder, or betrayal to account for the haunting, and the deeds almost always date back at least two centuries. Without it, I suspected bald-faced fakery."

Avalon said, "Why? What kind of fakery?"

DaRienzi smiled grimly. "I felt quite firmly that the whole thing was home-grown and of recent vintage. It was invented by the natives themselves as a kind of tourist attraction. I later found out that the village inn had prospered greatly in the last several years,

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and the Burlington newspapers had run several articles on the haunted cabin. The thing was their Loch Ness monster, if you know what I mean."

Gonzalo snapped his fingers in frustration. "Damn! Then you're saying there was no haunted cabin, after all."

"Of course not," said DaRienzi. "Did you think there would be? Even if the cabin were an old dilapidated wreck and had once been owned by a wicked farmer who abused and killed his innocent wife, do you think it would be haunted? *Really* haunted? —Besides, I haven't finished the story.

"On the last evening there, I intended to inspect the so-called haunted cabin. The storekeeper had the key and he surrendered it to me at my request early in the day, with as near a smile as his habitually dour expression permitted. 'Here you are, sir,' he said. I'm sure he then spread the story and the locals looked forward with anticipation to scaring me and having another story for the Burlington papers, and another infusion of wealth for the village.

"I inspected the house quickly and superficially by day. I didn't want any spying local to get too suspicious about the professionalism of the kind of search I might make. It was very ordinary, with the usual air of quiet and loneliness that long-deserted houses have. I found nothing unusual. After nightfall, I returned. There was no electricity, of course. You can't have that in a haunted house. Ghosts are, in any case, the children of the wavering, flickering shadows of the hearthfire. The steady light of electric bulbs is sure death to ghosts. It was necessary to investigate the house by flashlight, but I had a good one.

"I now gave the house a *real* inspection, foot by foot and inch by inch. I had no trouble discovering the wiring and the microphones. I suppose the local TV repairman had set it up and was under the impression he had done a good job, but he could scarcely expect to fool the trained and practiced eye."

Gonzalo said, "Then it was just as fake as you expected. And an obvious fake, too."

"Why are you surprised?" asked DaRienzi. "All haunted houses are fakes, but very few, I admit, as obviously so as this one."

"I suppose," said Drake, looking thoughtful, "that there was no point in lingering after that."

"On the contrary," said DaRienzi. "I felt it important to stay the night. I was curious as to the sort of manifestations they would manufacture for me. Surely they hadn't wired the place for nothing.

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And it's a good thing I did, because, as I told you at the beginning, they did startle me. I took off my jacket and shoes and sat in the one chair that looked as though it would bear my weight and be reasonably comfortable. Then I waited."

"Staying up all night is no fun," muttered Trumbull.

"I didn't stay up all night," said DaRienzi. "The manifestations came long before the night was over."

"What were they?" asked Gonzalo eagerly.

"Nothing more than my name," said DaRienzi. "There was an eerie whisper, with just a trace of sound that told me it was coming in over a microphone. 'Marcellus DaRienzi, Marcellus DaRienzi,' then a pause, then again. It was repeated four times altogether and the last repetition of my name was allowed to die away into a third screech that sounded like 'Beware.' It was all very primitive.

"When I decided the show was over at about two A.M., I got up, left, went to Harry's, and slept the rest of the night in comfort. By midmorning I was cleaning up and packing, and by midafternoon I left for New York."

Drake said, "Did anyone ask what had happened the night before?"

"No. They saw me and knew I was alive, but they knew what had happened. And I didn't feel any great need to discuss it."

Gonzalo writhed in his seat and finally said, "I don't want to insult you, but that's a pretty dull ghost story."

DaRienzi didn't seem the least insulted. "Actually," he said, "the ghost story had not yet begun. I was some twenty miles away from the village when it suddenly struck me like an alarm in the night. I had to pull the car over to the side of the road and start thinking."

Avalon frowned. "Thinking about what, Marc?"

"Don't you get it, Jeff? Once you found out your wife was all right, you suddenly realized you had to get to the true point: who had poked you? And once I found out that the house was a patent fake, I suddenly realized I had to get to the true point, too."

"Which was?" said Gonzalo.

"Which was: how did they know my name?"

There was a general look of surprise about the table (and a fleeting smile crossed Henry's face).

Trumbull put the general thought into words, growling, "Why shouldn't they know your name?"

"Because I never gave it to anybody in the village," said DaRienzi, "and not one of them ever asked. I told you I've made a fetish of anonymity in connection with my work all my professional life. I

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was there to write my book, not to publicize myself. I told no one my name. I regretted allowing anyone to see me, even.

"Do you see the problem this creates? The true believers of psychic phenomena are sometimes forced to admit fakery is involved, but they are then likely to insist that true paranormal effects are produced even in the midst of trickery. Well, then, despite all the wiring, despite the microphonic equipment, did something really paranormal take place? How could anyone have known my name?"

Trumbull said, "I don't think there's much mystery, Marcellus. You must have told someone your name."

"Rely on me," said DaRienzi stiffly, "I didn't tell anyone my name."

"In that case," said Trumbull, "someone must have recognized you."

"I can't believe that. I have very few photos of myself and none at all for distribution."

Halsted said, "They might have seen *you,* not your photograph. After all, you must give talks about your labors, and if you ever gave a talk in Burlington someone from the village may have happened to—"

DaRienzi registered annoyance. "You haven't listened to me. I hold my anonymity sacred. I don't give talks, and I certainly never talked in Burlington."

Rubin said, "Yours is not a common name, so they couldn't have made a lucky guess."

"It's unthinkable that they would."

Rubin said, "Was the name pronounced correctly?"

DaRienzi's face relaxed into a smile. "Good for you. Actually, both names were mispronounced. Marcellus was stressed on the first syllable rather than the second, while DaRienzi was given a long 'i' sound at the close."

"Which means," said Rubin, "that the so-called ghost saw your name but had never heard it pronounced."

"Exactly," said DaRienzi. "I came to the same conclusion."

"Which leads me to think," said Rubin, "that someone broke into your friend's summer house and ransacked your papers and belongings for your name."

"I'm sure that isn't so," said DaRienzi. "They couldn't have ransacked the house without disturbing my papers and I would have noticed that at once. Besides, as it happened, I didn't have my name on anything there."

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"Well, then," said Gonzalo, with more than a trace of satisfaction, "you're in Jeff's position. You're forced to consider the paranormal."

"I'm more in Jeff's position than you think, Mario, for, like Jeff, I solved the problem—or at least I found a satisfactory solution that involved nothing beyond the natural."

"And what was that?" asked Avalon.

DaRienzi said cheerfully, "Do none of you see it? It's much simpler than Jeff's solution and doesn't involve personal quirks that no one but the solver would be expected to know."

There was a longish pause, and Drake shook his head. "I'm afraid you've got us. Unless Henry has a suggestion."

"Henry," said Gonzalo abruptly, "what's the answer?"

Henry, from his quiet station at the sideboard, said, "If I may be permitted to say so, gentlemen, the solution was obvious from the start."

"Was it?" said DaRienzi a little captiously.

"I'm afraid so. At the beginning of your stay in Vermont, you bought two weeks' supplies and more at the village store. At today's prices, it may well have come to a sizable bit of money."

"It did," said DaRienzi, beginning to smile.

"And surely, considering our plastic culture, you did not pay in cash."

DaRienzi broke into a roar of laughter. "Got it! You got it! Of course I didn't pay cash. I shoved over my credit card—"

"And your name was on it," said Henry. "And your signature had to be placed on the slip they stamped, and it was so common and ordinary an action that you thought nothing of it, and didn't recall it at once later on. I'm afraid it is much more difficult to be anonymous in our modern society than we imagine."

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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

Three recent publications make this a good time to celebrate Eric Ambler, one of the undisputed masters of Twentieth Century suspense fiction. Though Ambler is credited with developing the intelligent spy novel and thus paving the way for writers like Len Deighton and John LeCarré, the first book-length critical study of his work has appeared only recently: *Eric Ambler* (Continuum, $24.95) by Peter Lewis, whose previous study of LeCarré won an Edgar award. Ambler's 1939 novel *A Coffin for Dimitrios*, recently reprinted with a substantial new Introduction by Greil Marcus (Carroll & Graf, $3.95), is an acknowledged classic of the thriller, though it really has more the structure of an unconventional detective story than an espionage tale, as mystery writer-hero Charles Latimer undertakes a dilletante-ish European research project looking for clues to the life of a killer known as Dimitrios. Indeed, one of the book's themes is the unreality of the classical detective fiction Latimer writes.

The third Ambler item constitutes the major news. It is not unusual for British writers, including some very well known ones, to have one or two usually early works that for whatever reason were never published in the United States or had publication delayed until years after their first appearances in Britain. Still, it seems inconceivable that a writer as celebrated as Ambler could have a first novel never published here until 1990. To add to the uniqueness of the event, the Ambler debut, which originally appeared in 1936, is not apprentice stuff but an outstanding piece of work in its own right.

***** Eric Ambler: *The Dark Frontier*, Mysterious, $18.95. In the substantial fourteen-page introduction written for this edition, Ambler reveals his goal was a full-length parody of the thrillers of the day, as practiced by E. P. Oppenheim, John Buchan, and Dornford Yates. It may also remind you of the later work of writers like Ian Fleming. In a situation somewhat similar to that of Mark Schorr's Red Diamond private-eye send-ups of many decades later, the middle-aged University of London scholar H. J. Barstow takes on the identity of fictional superspy Conway Carruthers. The plot's mcguffin is also somewhat remarkable for the mid-Thirties: a hideous new invention called an atomic bomb. Full-length parody is difficult: to succeed, it must have a parallel existence as a viable example of the genre being parodied. Here Ambler succeeds brilliantly, from the opening scene in the Royal Crown Hotel to the irony-filled newspaper clippings of the epilogue.

**** Julie Smith: *New Orleans Mourning*, St. Martin's, $17.95.

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Rex, King of Carnival (a.k.a. Chauncey St. Amant), is shot to death by a Dolly Parton-costumed assassin during the Mardi Gras parade, and policewoman Skip Landon, a maverick with connections to New Orleans aristocracy, investigates. Smith has always been good, but this long novel of character and atmosphere takes her to new heights. The background of a unique American city and the insider's understanding of its people are especially admirable, and the reader won't feel confident about the crime's ultimate solution until the final pages.

**** Ellis Peters: *The Heretic's Apprentice*, Mysterious, $16.95. The latest novel about Twelfth Century monk Brother Cadfael is an outstanding one, certainly in the upper third of his sixteen adventures. Concerning a young traveler accused of heresy, it has more theological content than usual, more pure detection to balance the customary romance, and an action climax harrowing enough to threaten the author's cozy-writer membership card. Specialist collectors should know it's also an example of the bibliomystery.

*** William L. DeAndrea: *Atropos*, Mysterious, $18.95. The fourth in the author's espionage series about the multi-named agent now known as Allan Trotter has the kind of Cold War plot recent events have rendered unfashionable, but that's beside the point. Good storytelling and tricky plotting can overcome changes in the headlines. The tale of sinister Soviet conspiracy threatening a presidential election again demonstrates that many of the best paranoia thrillers come from the right wing of the political spectrum.

*** Carolyn G. Hart: *A Little Class in Murder*, Doubleday/Crime Club, $12.95; Bantam, $3.95. Published virtually simultaneously in paperback and hardcover—collectors should note the Crime Club edition is the true first—the latest case for mystery-book dealer Annie Laurance Darling finds her in academia, teaching a course on Christie, Sayers, and Rinehart at a nearby university and becoming involved in a journalism-department murder. A very enjoyable novel, with the classical trappings, character comedy, and incessant mystery references that are series trademarks.

*** Jay Brandon: *Fade the Heat*, Pocket Books, $18.95. San Antonio District Attorney Mark Blackwell confronts a personal and professional crisis when his son is accused of raping a cleaning woman in his office building. The legal background is knowledgably presented, and Brandon gets maximum value out of Blackwell's painfully believable family relationships.

Among the reprints is one of the better novels about Forties' Hollywood private eye Toby Peters, Stuart M. Kaminsky's *The Man Who Shot Lewis Vance* (Mysterious, $4.50), first published in 1986. Peters is involved with both ends of the Tinseltown political spectrum, represented by John Wayne and Charlie Chaplin, but the best character is a purely fictional one: an ex-cop turned house detective

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known as "Straight-Ahead" Beason. Also new in paperback is Peters's 1985 encounter with Joe Louis, *Down for the Count* (Mysterious, $4.50).

All Sherlockian collections should include two new titles from Gaslight Publications (626 North College Ave., Bloomington, IN 47404).

Robert L. Fish's intricate and hilarious parodies of the master sleuth, all of which first appeared in *EQMM* between 1960 and 1981, are gathered in a single volume in *Schlock Homes: The Complete Bagel Street Saga* ($29.95). Included are 23 tales from two now-scarce earlier volumes, *The Incredible Schlock Homes* (1966) and *The Memoirs of Schlock Homes* (1974), plus nine not previously collected. Successful humor looks so effortless, it can easily be undervalued. Fish, who had a varied and distinguished career as a mystery novelist, believed these short pieces represented his finest work.

One of the most curious sidelights in the literary history of Sherlock Holmes is "The Case of the Man Who Was Wanted," published in the August 1948 issue of *Cosmopolitan* as a newly discoverd Holmes adventure by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle but actually the work of an obscure English architect named Arthur Whitaker. In *Nova 57 Minor: The Waxing and Waning of the Sixty-First Adventure of Sherlock Holmes* ($15.95), Baker Street scholar Jon L. Lellenberg tells the whole story of the affair, no less fascinating for being an apparent misunderstanding rather than a hoax, based on the correspondence of the principal players—Whitaker, Doyle biographer Hesketh Prichard, and litigious heir Adrian Conan Doyle—and (in minor roles) such luminaries as Vincent Starrett and George Bernard Shaw. The text of the story in question, not a bad Holmes pastiche at all, is also included. Most Sherlockian scholarship (and mock-scholarship) is so arcane and specialized as to attract only the most ardent Irregulars, but this short book should interest a wider audience.

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"Q"

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POE-TIC CORNER

THE RESERVED DETECTIVE

by WILLIAM C. THOMAS

Upon the thyme-fringed Sussex cliffs,
There lies an ancient cottage
Where lives a man of great repute
Retired and in his dotage.
This man, whose very name strikes fear
In every villain's heart,
Who elevated criminal science
Until it was an art,
Now spends his mornings out-of-doors
To feel the channel breeze
While writing up his memoirs
And fussing with his bees.
But like the coastguard sentinels
Which dot the southern coast,
Who watch the sea in readiness
And won't desert their post,
So, too, this old man reads the *Times*
And studies every crime
In case the Yard should be in need
Of someone "in his prime."

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"Q"

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ANOTHER GRAVE TONE

by JAMES HOLDING

Under this cold, unfeeling stone
Are shreds of flesh and bits of bone
That once were a terrorist named Tom
Who thought he knew how to make a bomb.

© *1990 by James Holding.*

"Q"

FIRST YOU'VE GOT TO CLUIT

by CAROL R. MILLS

In "whodunits" the crook has to duit,
Then he gets caught 'cause he bluit.
Well, I'll write a story
Where he'll get the glory—
Whenever I get around tuit.

© *1990 by Carol R. Mills.*

"Q"

WHITE-COLLAR CRIME

by STEVEN J. SWEENEY

At first she took notepads and then a few pens—
The boss wouldn't miss just a few odds and ends.
The supplies that she pilfered they'd take as a loss—
But then she got greedy and went for the boss,
A man happily married to an armchair detective,
Who quickly deduced and became quite protective.
The girl from the office was listed as missing—
The boss and his Mrs. went back to their kissing.

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BEHIND BARS

by JEANETTE WEISS

Once more she confronted her piano—
She practiced arpeggios and scales,
She knew that her chords were discordant
And her triads just pitiful wails.

Despairing, she tackled a scherzo
And thought she could hear Chopin sigh—
She battled a two-part invention
As Bach wiped a tear from his eye.

Her panic crescendoed to frenzy—
"These classics I'm rendering dead!
But I think that I know the solution—
I'll murder my teacher instead."

On time he arrived for her lesson—
Unknowing, he came through the door—
But during a fugue demonstration,
He gleaned it was his last encore.

She realized her deed must be punished,
For murder's the most heinous sin,
So she bravely searched through her phonebook
Till she found *Lessons—Violin.*

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"Q"

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a *NEW* Baytown story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

"So there is no just cause or impediment why this person should not be taken to the cleaners," Joe Huck said.

Stan Percival rested the palm of his hand on the top of Joe's head. It was like a bishop confirming a new parishioner. Or a bowler selecting his ball. "Joe, it's like crop-dusting. It's nasty, but it has to be done . . ."

THE CORONET CHRONICLES

by WILLIAM BANKIER

I telephoned the office of the writers' union in Toronto. "It's vital that I obtain the whereabouts of my erstwhile partner, Stan Percival," I said. "This is Joe Huck. Can you help me?"

A girl with a great voice said, "It so happens I can. Congratulations, Mr. Huck. The word here is that your old radio series is being resurrected for television."

"If we can produce a script for a pilot film by November. Which is why I have to locate Percival."

"We mailed him a residuals check from the sale of the radio series in Tasmania. It went to—here it is—the Coronet Hotel in Baytown, Ontario. Care of some doctor named Livingstone."

Stanley Livingstone. I had located my old buddy. But in Baytown? Staying at the hotel where I used to work as a bellboy in my teenage years?

I even remembered the telephone number. Nursing my fourth cup of coffee at the desk in my Montreal apartment, I dialed and said, "May I have the room of Dr. Livingstone, please?"

Here was another interesting voice—the shyest sound since Bambi. "Just one moment, sir."

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Clicks and clunks on the line. The Coronet was still using its original belt-drive, gas-fired telephone system. Then I heard the familiar resonant baritone, ripe with deceit. "Dr. Livingstone."

"I presume," I said. "This is Joe Huckleberry Finn."

"Joe! Your timing is brilliant. I was about to call you. Keep the Finn, you're going to need an alias."

"That's not what I need. I need a script for a two-hour pilot film. By November. If it's acceptable, the CBC is going to spring for thirteen weeks of *Rooms Without Doors* on television."

"That means me back in Montreal. Where the former Mrs. Percival can knock me down and sit on me while her lawyer steals my wallet."

"If this works, there'll be lots of money to pay alimony. Stan, opportunity is knocking."

"I like your hometown, Joe. What a great place to hide. The other day I saw Ambrose Bierce coming out of the Paragon Cafe."

"I need you, Stanley. I can't write this script alone."

"And this hotel. I love the chintz bag with the coiled rope in it, one end tied to the radiator. If there's a fire, I can hang myself."

I ignored him. "So you're driving back this afternoon?"

"Other way around, Joe. You're coming here."

"We *could* work on the script there," I conceded.

"But not until we bring off another in our succession of spectacular cons. There's a lady living at this hotel who made the mistake of choosing me for an enemy."

"Your scams never work," I countered. "We always lose." I reminded him of a couple of his Byzantine mischiefs. The time we sold the Jacques Cartier Bridge to the millionaire Baytown construction magnate, E. J. Lewicki. The time we brought the bogus Russian heavyweight "Battleship Potemkin" to Baytown for a contest against the local hero. Lewicki always turned the tables on us. "Don't try it again, Stanley."

"Calm down. Mr. Lewicki, rest his soul, is no longer here to torment us. Anyway, I need you to play a part in this operation. You will be Joseph Finn, representing Blue Moon Publishing in Montreal. Together we will teach the lady a lesson by separating her from ten grand. And I won't work on the script until this is over." Silence on the line. "My lower lip is thrust way out, Joe. Say you'll come."

"I'll come."

Tessa Atterbury was standing behind the reception desk. She

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greeted me as I crossed the lobby and set down my suitcase. "You must be Mr. Finn. You're exactly as Stanley described you."

She was pale and starched and ironed, including the flat blonde hair halfway down her back. The round face contained two wide eyes with large pupils almost devoid of pigmentation. The effect was of an alien technology trying to produce a human being. Yet she was plump and attractive. Was this Stan's current squeeze?

Signing a registration card, I said, "Is he here?"

She plugged a cord into a socket and drew back a key. The switchboard was as it used to be. It did something to me, seeing the familiar workings of my old place of employment. "Dr. Stan?" Tessa said into the phoneset. "He's here." To me she said, "Your room is 109. He's in 111. The connecting door is open."

An old man was coming down the stairs as I waited to go up. He was wearing a porkpie hat and a two-day growth of beard. His eyes were focused on some distant horizon. There were two pay telephones by the front door. He went to them, raised both arms to shoulder level, and, with the grace of ritual, pressed the coin-release buttons. No money fell, but he thrust a finger into each of the receptacles, anyway.

"Hi, Mr. Rafter," Tessa called. Rafter pushed open the brass-plated doors and went out onto Front Street.

I trudged upstairs to where I unlocked the door of Room 109 and carried my luggage inside. There was a pizza box on the bed, torn open, with one slice left. Pepperoni. Extra cheese. Stan Percival appeared in the connecting doorway, all 6′4″, 260 pounds of him. He was clad in jeans, a T-shirt, and bear-paw slippers. "Young Huck, it's you!"

"Why are you using my bed for a cafeteria?"

"Mine is all messed up. How long has it been? Five months?"

I closed my eyes and submitted to being lifted off the floor in the hug which is Stan's way. I am neat, reticent, frugal. Stan is none of the above. We have always earned equal wages. But while my bucks are invested in good clothes, a spiffy car, and safe mutual funds, Stan's money goes for food and beer and girls.

I freed myself. I took off my sharkskin jacket and hung it neatly in the closet. "Okay, what's your scheme? Let's get it over and start working on the pilot film."

Stan threw himself down on my bed. A hundred miles away, in the seismographic laboratory at the University of Toronto, a technician glanced at a jiggling needle. My partner made himself com-

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fortable, shoving the pizza box off the bed with his feet. The last slice fell on the carpet, pepperoni side up. "We're after a lady who lives in Room 214. Now that you're here, we're about to take her for ten grand. Mitzi Christie Collins, Ph.D. She's one of the hotel's permanent residents. It's hard to guess her age. She might be fifty, she might be older—she tries for thirty-five."

"I like the way her name scans." I recited Gray's *Elegy*. "The ploughman homeward plods his weary way, to Mitzi Christie Collins, Ph.D."

"Man, you're psychic. That's what this is about."

"It's about poetry?" Looking out the window, I saw the Town Hall across the street with a bank of telephones set back from the sidewalk. Mr. Rafter cruised by slowly, jiggling each coin-return. One of them paid. He pocketed the coin and drifted on.

"About writing in general. You'll meet Mitzi soon. She's a pretentious snob. She insists on her title. She has a business card pinned to the door of her room. She says she used to be in Mario Lanza movies. She has photographs. I think she played bit parts. She says she belongs to Mensa."

"The people with the high IQs."

"And she rattles away on her typewriter, producing what she calls her Coronet Chronicles. About the people who come and go in this hotel. I made it past the scrim inside her door one time. You should see it. There are miles of gauze festooned around the room with paper stars stuck to it. And incense burning. And spooky old snapshots on the walls. And thousands of pages of the Chronicles. I told her to cull a hundred pages. In preparation for the arrival of Mr. Finn from Blue Moon."

"I don't like it, Stan."

"You haven't even read it. I brought a page away with me." He got off the bed and headed through the connecting doorway, carrying the triangle of pizza on the sole of one slipper.

I yelled, "I mean I don't like the sound of *this*."

When he came back, he handed me a typewritten sheet. "This is page one."

I read it aloud.

"My worldly goods I carry in a trunk,
The only mail that reaches me is junk.
A tawdry, cheap hotel is where I stay.
Nobody knows my story, what the hey."

I gave back the page and said, "So?"

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"Blue Moon wants to put out a paperback edition. That's why you're here. You heard about it from me and you've come to negotiate the contract."

"Doesn't that mean we pay her?"

"No. The market for this kind of material is limited. The author will pay part of the cost of publishing."

"Which will never happen, because when we get the money it's over the hills and far away."

"You've got it." Stan was looming over me, his big face wreathed in an insincere smile. The eyes looked haunted. "What do you think?"

"I hate it. This is nothing like the Lewicki scams. E.J. was a greedy millionaire. Selling him the bridge was a challenge. So was convincing him that the Israeli cabdriver was a Russian boxer. This isn't the same. We're talking about taking some eccentric woman's money on the pretense of publishing her writing."

"She brought it on herself. Know what she did to me? My first week in town, I invited her to dinner. You know me, I need somebody to impress. And she's the only up-market individual in the hotel. So I made a reservation at the County Gardens."

"The ritzy place across the bay."

"She said she'd meet me there. I did it my way. Special food ordered in advance, big tip for the host on the way in. Bottle of champagne. I was two glasses ahead when it got through to me she wasn't coming."

"She stood you up?"

"Like I was cardboard, with an easel back." Stan's eyes hardened. "Worse, she told Tessa on the desk what she'd done. So I was humiliated not only at the restaurant but here as well."

"Okay, so there is no just cause or impediment why this person should not be taken to the cleaners."

Stan rested the palm of his hand on the top of my head. It was like a bishop confirming a new parishioner. Or a bowler selecting his ball. "Joe, it's like crop-dusting. It's nasty, but it has to be done."

"When do I meet her?"

"The time it takes me to get out of these slippers and into my boots."

The business card on the door of Room 214 was mounted on a heart cut out of red art paper so it looked like a fifth-grade valentine. Stan performed a frivolous knock. The door opened inward, catching

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on a fall of cheesecloth bearing dozens of gold and silver stars. I smelled incense competing with the aroma of grilled bacon.

"Gentlemen, do come in!" Mitzi was holding herself very straight, as if she had a dictionary balanced on her head. Her wig was the most obvious I've ever seen—a silvery cloud that swirled above a noble forehead like cotton candy. Her eyes were large and set far apart on a crumpled paper face. They flashed on and off as if the battery feeding sanity to her brain had a loose connection. Over her tiny lips, she had painted a perfect cupid's bow in devastating red. She was wearing pink high-bib overalls and a white blouse. Shiny patent-leather toes peeked out from beneath the cuffs.

"Dr. Collins, this is Joseph Finn, who represents Blue Moon, the famous publishing firm in Montreal."

"I looked them up in the business directory and they weren't listed."

"Soon to be famous," Stan improvised. "They only recently hung out their shingle. Isn't that right, Mr. Finn?"

"Absolutely, Dr. Livingstone," I said, falling into the Gallagher and Sheen mode.

"I'd ask you to sit down, but I don't want you to linger. Mr. Percival told me you'd be interested in publishing my Coronet Chronicles."

"I've only read page one, but I was impressed with the clarity and style."

"Why, thank you. I have hundreds of pages and each one is finer than the one before. There's no telling how excellent they'd be if I had better people to write about. But I am reduced to the individuals who inhabit this hotel and who work here, and they're common folk. It isn't their fault, but they are not interesting in and of themselves, so I have to use my creative genius to make them interesting. Which I can do because I am a member of Mensa."

My anger was instantaneous and beyond reason. "I understand you've selected a hundred pages of the best."

"Actually, ninety-nine. You already have page one." She swept aside veil after veil that segmented the room, revealing glimpses of a bed with stuffed animals on it and a table with an electric broiler on it. A narrow shelf on one wall held a row of squat candles, above which I saw a framed oil painting of a mature man in uniform. Mitzi snatched up a sheaf of typescript tied with red ribbon like a British civil-service file. "Guard this with your life," she said as she handed it to me. "Or, preferably, with something more effective."

Stan said, "I confirmed the business arrangement with Mr. Finn.

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Unfortunately, the printer won't begin setting type until he has money up front."

"I don't keep ten thousand dollars in my room," the author said, "surrounded by thieves and con artists."

"You'd be a fool," I murmured.

"It's in the hotel safe," Stan ventured.

"A safe is nothing more than a piggy-bank for bandits. The ten thousand, which I withdrew from my account when you told me Mr. Finn would be here, is in the freezer compartment of the refrigerator in the hotel kitchen."

Stan loved it. "Your money is on ice."

"It's in an envelope inside a carton of frozen yogurt. They keep my perishables for me, my bacon, my ice cream. As well they might, considering how much they charge for shoddy accommodation."

Stan kept his lips sealed until we were back in 109–111. Then he grabbed himself and wrestled himself to the floor. Coins fell from his pockets and his comb snapped. "The cash is in the freezer. We can grab it when we're ready!"

"I'm getting a bad feeling," I said. "Something is telling me not to tangle with this lady."

"That's why crime pays so well," Stan said. "It gives you bad feelings."

I picked up my room key. "I have to think about this. I'm going for a walk."

I trotted downstairs, waved at Tessa as I passed the desk, went outside, and walked across the market square. The uneasy feeling wouldn't go away. Was it okay to con the lady out of so much money? True, she had left Stan naked at his County Gardens table. And she thought she was noble and everyone else base. But was this an acceptable motive for fraud?

I did a circuit, emerging on Front Street near the bank of telephones by the Town Hall. I picked up a receiver, deposited a quarter, and dialed the Coronet. Tessa answered and I asked for Room 111. When Stan came on the line I said, "You have to sell me again."

"Come home, Joe."

"This is *not* like Lewicki!"

"No, it's easier. And foolproof, because nobody else is involved. You've met Mitzi—that was the hard part. Now we don't even have to wait for her to go to the bank. The cash is stashed in the hotel

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freezer. You worked here, you know your way around. Tomorrow we'll go and get it. And we'll be gone."

"But should we?"

"We must. For a very strong reason."

"You won't work on the script unless I do."

"Hold onto that idea, Joe."

"Then maybe we should do it tonight."

"Wrong. Once we have the cash, we should run. It would look strange as hell checking out of here at this hour. Checkout time is noon. We'll do it in the morning."

I walked some more, then returned to my room. Stan looked in on me as I unfastened the red ribbon and settled myself by the reading lamp. Before concentrating on page 2 of the Coronet Chronicles, I tried once again. "Can we drop it, Dr. Livingstone?"

"We're committed, Mr. Finn."

I slept well after I closed the connecting door to mask Stan's snoring. Stan produces two varieties of snore. There is a treble sound that has a peevish, questioning note to it. Then there is a profundo rumbling like a bear in a pit.

Thinking about the Chronicles, I knew they were no work of genius. But they were original—a quality for which I award marks. Each page described a person or an event, always with sarcasm verging on slander. Some of them made me laugh.

In the morning, I knew better than to rouse a sleeping Stan. We had until noon to steal Mitzi's money and check out. I left the hotel, climbed into my car, drove across the bay, and had breakfast at the County Gardens. The scene of Stan's humiliation was operating at a tranquil pace. The granola was good and the air smelled of clover and apple orchards.

When I drove back across the bridge and parked in front of the hotel, the beverage rooms were open. I know from experience that there is nothing sweeter than entering a beer parlor before the day's trade arrives to make things hectic. I went inside, expecting to be first, and found old Rafter seated at a table by the door. He had a pillar of quarters on the table in front of him. His porkpie hat was dead level above the distant eyes and a shy smile worked its way through the mask of whiskers.

"Good morning." He waved me to a chair. "I'm Edgar Rafter. Your name is Finn. Tessa the rock star told me."

"Rock star?"

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"That sweet kid would rather be in a band. On quiet afternoons, she practices her guitar in the back room."

The waiter arrived. I insisted on paying for the beer. The old man shifted his stack of coins like chips on a roulette table. We both drank.

It turned out that Edgar Rafter was a retired policeman. For years, he had walked a beat in Centralia. One evening about ten o'clock he heard gunfire—five shots in rapid succession from a big house on Maple Lane. Rafter knew the location well. It was the home of the Collins family. He had been in there only last week, posing in uniform while Mitzi Collins put the finishing touches on his portrait. "I never thought it looked like me," he grumbled.

"Our Mitzi?" I asked. "The lady in 214?"

"That's what she's turned into. She wasn't always like that. In Centralia, she was a socialite. Brightest woman in town. Everybody wanted her." The retired cop stared into his beer.

"You heard shots."

"I went up on the porch and found the husband in the doorway. Dead. The wife said she thought a burglar was coming in, so she took her gun and shot him. Seven times at close range."

"One of those."

"There were never any burglaries in that neighborhood. It was Collins' normal time for coming home. I did what any cop would do. I arrested her for murder."

"Did it take?"

"She's inside right now. Doing fifteen for murder one. Turned out Collins had a girl friend and he was getting ready to leave. So his wife gave him a bon voyage."

I had the picture. "And Mitzi left town."

"She couldn't handle the scandal. It did something to her head." The waiter came in answer to Rafter's signal. I paid for another round. The old cop said, "Somebody had to keep an eye on her. When she moved here, I took early retirement."

"And now she ignores you."

"That's okay with me. She knows I'm here." Rafter raised his glass.

I left the beverage room by the street door. I saw Stan's car parked by the lobby entrance. Stan was holding open the door for Tessa Atterbury. "You're just in time, Joe," he said. "We're taking Tessa for a test-drive. She heard I'm planning to sell my car and may buy

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it." He slammed the door, then whispered to me, "We can escape in your car. We don't need this old crate."

Stan got behind the wheel, I climbed onto the back seat, and we headed out across the Bay Bridge. Tessa sat holding her shoulder bag like a guitar, humming riffs. Her face was set in a determined frown. At one point she sang, "A girl needs wheeeeels!" I said nothing about the car's hidden faults—the hole in the exhaust manifold, the ravenous consumption of oil. The old clunker had always taken Stan where he wanted to go.

We stopped while driver and passenger exchanged seats. Tessa drove well once she became accustomed to the feel of the pedals and the steering wheel. An hour later, we were back in front of the hotel.

Stan said, "What's the verdict?"

"How much?"

"Are we talking cash?"

"I have cash."

"For cash, the price gets better. A thousand dollars." I cleared my throat to dislodge a lump of outrage and Stan said, "But for you, seven hundred."

"That's a deal." Tessa unzipped her bag. She reached inside and fumbled in an envelope. She drew out seven hundred-dollar bills and handed them over. Stan gave her the registration and the pink slip and told her she would have to let the authorities know she now owned the car. "I'll take care of it," she said.

Stan and I went inside and Tessa drove away. As we went upstairs to pack, I told Stan what I'd learned about Mitzi from Edgar Rafter. "As they say," I concluded, "she was not always as we see her now."

There was luggage open on both beds when the telephone rang. I answered and it was Mitzi Christie Collins, Ph.D. A Mario Lanza record was playing in the background. She said, "I've been busy since breakfast designing the dust jacket for the Coronet Chronicles. I have several layouts I'd like to show you. At the university, I took courses in the visual arts."

I was doing too much listening. It made Stan nervous. He snatched the telephone from me and said, "Dr. Collins, everything is moving on schedule. Can we see you tomorrow about the payment for the typesetting?" I guess she said yes. He put down the telephone and handed me a six-pack of beer. Taped to it was a slip of paper with his room number on it. I knew what to do. I went down to the desk and spoke to the young man on duty.

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"Can I just pop this into the fridge?" I asked him. "I used to work here—I know where it is." The lad was listening on headphones to some sort of jazz cassette. Even so, I gave him no time to supervise my action. I headed for the lounge, passed on through, and within seconds was opening the door to the kitchen.

Busy staff were getting ready for lunch. They weren't interested in somebody who knew where he was going. I inhaled the familiar smell, a combination of mashed potatoes and roach killer. I went to the refrigerator and swung open the door, slung the beer inside, and drew back the door to the freezer compartment.

I saw a brown paper bag. Taped to it was a scrap of paper bearing the number 214. I broke the tape sealing the bag, opened it, and saw the carton of frozen yogurt. Tucked beside it was an envelope. I examined the contents of the envelope. It was a single page of hotel stationery with writing on it.

"Dear Stan and Joe," it said. "My need is greater than yours. And I've been putting up with this crazy lady for a long time. Goodbye and good luck. Tessa Atterbury."

I kept Tessa's note. At the desk, I said to the clerk, "Will Tessa be on today?"

"She quit," he grumbled. "Without notice. We're all working extra shifts."

Upstairs, Stan read the note. "She must have been listening in when you telephoned the room last night."

"What do we do?"

"Walk away. The hotel will figure it out with the money gone and Tessa vanishing without notice. It lets us off the hook."

"But Mitzi will still want her Chronicles published."

"Not by us, Huck," he said. "Not by us."

We made a side trip to Room 214 on our way to check out. Stan told his cover story—that the owners of Blue Moon Publishing had suffered a setback in the stock market and were going into liquidation.

We loaded our luggage into the trunk of my car. Stan slipped into the passenger seat, throwing a nostalgic glance at the hotel facade. I noticed Edgar Rafter a block away on Front Street, patrolling the telephones at the service station. "Wait a minute," I told Stan as I went back inside the hotel.

The clerk supplied five dollars in quarters. I came outside, ran across to the Town Hall telephones, and deposited four coins in each

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machine. My timing was perfect. As I slipped behind the wheel and waited, Rafter arrived.

With a flourish, he pressed two return buttons at once. From across the street, we could hear the coins fall. Rafter stared at the telephones as if they had spoken his name. He scooped out the money and put it in his pocket. He pressed two more returns. Again, coins came clattering down. His pocket was becoming heavy. One telephone left. He leaned into it and heard four quarters fall.

Stan came pounding up the stairs much too fast for a man his size and age. He stood panting in the doorway of our office overlooking Ste. Catherine Street. "I was mugged," he said.

"Would you recognize the perpetrator?"

"Of course. My former wife. She caught me coming out of Dinty Moore's with my wallet in my hand. I had six of Tessa's hundreds in it. She got five."

"Relax. We get up-front money as soon as we turn in the script. But we have to write it. Apply yourself."

My partner fell onto a plastic-and-aluminum recliner chair which is the only furniture in our office other than the desk, my swivel chair, and the old standard typewriter. It turned into an average day. By three in the afternoon, we had hammered out six pages. Stan was almost asleep—the high murmurs had begun but not the bear-pit growls. I was casting about for anything to stimulate my barren imagination. In my briefcase, I could see a few dogeared pages—they were a sample of the Coronet Chronicles I had kept with me.

They made relaxing reading. They made me laugh. They cried out to be included in the script. *Rooms Without Doors* could use this material. The character of an eccentric writer coming and going and delivering rhyming analyses of other characters was the lift we needed.

"Stan, wake up!"

I explained my idea. I read examples from Mitzi's manuscript. He could see how it would work. "And she'll never know. She's too spacy to go to movies or watch television."

"We'll cross that bridge," I said righteously, "when we've burned our boats and let sleeping dogs lie in them."

We completed the pilot film in three more days. We turned it in to the CBC producer and waited for a response. It came by telelphone that night. Reactions were enthusiastic. Not only would they make

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the pilot, we were authorized to start working on the series of thirteen half-hour episodes.

It was Stan who fielded the congratulatory call. He had a look on his face. "Can you guess what sold it?" he asked.

On this warm summer evening, a biting wind blew into the room from Greenland's icy mountains. "Mitzi's magic chronicles," I murmured.

"You have to go back there, my son," he said. "We need the rest of those pages. You must make her turn them over."

I was too tense to enjoy the drive back to Baytown. I parked the car in front of the Coronet Hotel, went inside, and headed straight upstairs. When she opened the door, Mitzi Christie Collins, Ph.D., didn't have her wig on. She was wearing a diaphanous kerchief knotted under her chin. "May I come in?" I asked her.

"Not unless I ask you."

There was no reason good news couldn't be conveyed through a doorway. "Dr. Collins, I'm a freelance scriptwriter."

"A new career?"

"Publishing was a sideline. My partner and I are writing a CBC television series. I took the liberty of using some of your Chronicles in the pilot film. They work like a charm."

"Of course they do."

"I came here to ask your permission to use more of your material. You will, of course, receive payment. And the writing credits will include your name."

"I want you to use both Doctor and Ph.D. I know it's redundant, but some people miss one or the other. And please put Mensa after my name."

"Then we have an agreement?"

"Not yet. Come inside." I went in past the cheesecloth veils suspended from the ceiling. "I was about to make myself a bacon sandwich. I'm afraid there isn't enough for you to have one."

While the spacy lady worked over her electric broiler, I turned and found myself facing the portrait over the shelf with its row of candles. The subject was a man wearing a policeman's uniform, and there was something wrong with the mouth. But there was no mistaking his identity. Clean shaven, and without the porkpie hat, this was none other than Rafter of the Phone Patrol.

From behind me Mitzi said, "He could have been my best friend."

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She took a bite of bacon, bread, and mayonnaise. "But then he killed my parents."

Half an hour later, with a rough agreement bearing both our signatures, I left the hotel and headed back to Montreal. Apart from Mitzi's loony version of the family tragedy, I had bad news for my partner.

I drove directly to Stan's bleak apartment in the low-rent district near the Turcot freight yards. He was drinking Champale and watching the late show with his girl friend, Buster. Buster was the percussionist with an undiscovered rock band called The Rink Rats. Stan had promised to promote the group to world prominence in the next three months.

Buster went to make coffee while I sat down with my head between my ears and my face hanging open. Stan saw the signs.

"What happened? Didn't you get us more Chronicles?"

"I got 'em. I also got Mitzi. It's a set."

By the time Buster came back with three hot mugs, Stan was in the picture. Mitzi Christie Collins, Ph.D., was insisting on joining us as cowriter. She had always wanted to live in Montreal and this was her chance. She would be with us, working on episode one, within the week.

Stan started to laugh. "I love crime," he said. "And the way it goes with punishment. Working day in, day out, with that rage-maker? You have to admit it's poetic."

Buster had the biceps of a girl who loads and drives a van and can do a twenty-minute drum break that sounds like vintage Buddy Rich. At the moment she was looking jealous. "Can we talk about the band?" she said.

A year later, much had happened. All thirteen scripts were completed, sold, and paid for. I was rich and Stan was at least a month away from being flat broke. The Rink Rats were established—but that's another story. It includes the addition to the group of a pale-eyed, flat-haired lead guitarist named Tessa.

Mitzi Collins turned out to be a pleasant surprise. Under the discipline of deadlines, she focused. As her self-esteem rose, she stopped treating other people like serfs. She began dating a handsome security guard from the Edifice Radio-Canada. Their introduction was arranged by none other than her friend, mentor, and chauffeur, Edgar Rafter.

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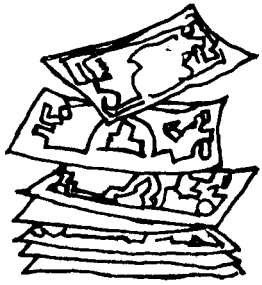
Yes, the former cop was with us, too. When he arrived, he told me he was so accustomed to keeping an eye on Mitzi he couldn't live any other way.

But of all these changes, Rafter showed me the one thing I never expected to see. It happened when we three men were having a beer in the Rymark Tavern and he said he wanted to call Mitzi. "To find out when she needs the car," he said.

That was when I saw it. He went to the cubicle by the door, picked up the receiver, and then, with my own astonished eyes, I saw Edgar Rafter actually put money *into* a telephone.



DETECTIVERSE

TURNING THE TABLES

by WILLIAM F. SMITH

A gourmand with marital strife
Poisoned the food of his wife,
But the glutton was beaten
By a dinner uneaten,
And a spouse with a huge carving knife.

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ON OUR COVER

For over a decade, Tristan Rogers has portrayed Commissioner Robert Scorpio on the ABC-TV daytime drama *General Hospital.* Born in Melbourne, Australia, Rogers was a musician and model before embarking on an acting career in London in the early 1970s. After success on both British and Australian television, he moved to the United States in 1978. He studied to learn an American accent only to find himself cast as Scorpio, the super-suave sleuth on *General Hospital,* where his Aussie accent has made him one of the most popular figures on daytime television. His debut on the show in 1980 earned him a *Soap Opera Digest* "Soapy Award" as Most Exciting New Actor. In 1989, Rogers received the coveted Soap Opera Update Award for Best Actor in Daytime Television (equivalent to the People's Choice Award, this honor is bestowed upon the performer by the general public). He was named "Most Valuable Player" on *General Hospital*, and is again nominated in that category in 1990.

In 1984, Rogers began his association with the American Cinema Awards Foundation. Starting by assisting in the Foundation's fund raising efforts on behalf of the Motion Picture & Television Country Home and Hospital, Rogers is now Vice President of the A. C. A. F. and Executive Producer of the organization's annual gala fundraiser in Beverly Hills. The foundation has raised over one million dollars for the Motion Picture and Television Fund, providing theater-arts scholarships at colleges throughout the U.S., and providing free screenings of classic films for senior citizens and the disabled at hospitals throughout the country.

One of Rogers' upcoming projects will be the Disney animated feature, *The Rescuers Down Under,* in which he supplies the voice of Jake, an Australian kangaroo mouse. However, Rogers feels himself headed more toward producing. As he puts it, "I've always been fairly outspoken and there comes a point where it's time to put your ideas where your mouth is."

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

DONALD OLSON

Carolyn turned her amber-eyed gaze on the detective standing beside Charles and scribbling in his little black-covered notebook. "I didn't see his face at all. I couldn't move my head. Then I was on the floor and he was running away."

"With your purse."

"With my alligator-and-suede shoulder bag, yes. I don't suppose I'll ever see it again."

"Maybe, maybe not. It was your money he was after. I suppose you had credit cards?"

"Several, and about a hundred dollars in cash."

"No other valuables?"

"Nothing irreplaceable. What are the chances of your catching him?"

McCrory grinned wryly. "Slim, to be honest. Chances are he's the same slippery dude who's pulled several of these attacks around the Bellinger Gardens area . . ."

THE MISSING LETTER

by DONALD OLSON

Shortly before midnight on a sultry August night, Carolyn Wendell parked her car in the underground garage of the Wellington, stepped out, made sure the doors were locked, and started across the striplighted expanse of concrete toward the elevator. As she would later tell the police, she heard no warning sound whatsoever, had no awareness of the attacker's presence until she felt that vise of hard flesh and bone locked around her neck, the pressure of a body against hers. Not until the vise had abruptly released its grip and

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she was flung brutally to the floor, leaving her dimly conscious of swiftly retreating footsteps, did she realize that it was only her purse the man was after.

When the police arrived, Carolyn was lying on the sofa in the spacious living room of her fifth-floor duplex, feeling dazed from the aftershock and the brandy Charles had urged upon her. Now he hovered over her as if, unable to have protected her from her assailant, he must shield her from the barrage of questions aimed at her by this pudgy, moon-faced Detective McCrory.

Charles's air of concern, his ineffectual gestures of tenderness, struck Carolyn as unnatural, almost amusing. When was the last time he had played the doting husband? Had it taken something as traumatic as a mugger's attack to shake him out of his complacency? Charles was ten years older than Carolyn, a placid, undemanding, habit-oriented man devoted to his business, more easily amused than angered, prudent and predictable. Had any husband the right, Carolyn often wondered, to be so insufferably dull?

"Charles, please stop fussing. I'm quite all right. He really didn't hurt me." She turned her amber-eyed gaze on the detective standing beside Charles and scribbling in his little black-covered notebook. "I didn't see his face at all. I couldn't move my head. Then I was on the floor and he was running away."

"With your purse."

"My alligator-and-suede shoulder bag, yes. I don't suppose I'll ever see it again."

"Maybe, maybe not. It was your money he was after. I suppose you had credit cards?"

"Several, and about a hundred dollars in cash."

"No other valuables?"

"Nothing irreplaceable. What are the chances of your catching him?"

McCrory grinned wryly. "Slim, to be honest. Chances are he's the same slippery dude who's pulled several of these attacks around the Bellinger Gardens area."

Charles saw the detective out, then returned to resume his hovering, suggesting for the third time that he maybe ought to call their doctor.

"Your concern is touching, darling," replied Carolyn with a shade of sarcasm he was quick to detect.

"*Touching?* My God, Carolyn, you're my wife. I think this has

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upset me more than it has you. When I think of what might have happened—"

"Well, it didn't, so let's try to forget about it. I just want to go to bed."

"Of course. Shall I come up, too? I mean—"

"No, Charles, not tonight, please."

As if trying to adopt her air of unconcern, he said, "Was it good?"

She looked up with a startled glance. *"Good?"*

"The film."

"Oh. Margaret liked it. I found it boring."

"Maybe I'd better call her, tell her—"

"No, don't," Carolyn said. "She wouldn't sleep a wink—you know her. Tell her in the morning if you think it won't throw off her shorthand."

"I'll stay home tomorrow. I'd rather you weren't alone. He knows your address, he has your keys."

"Don't be silly, darling. *You* stay home from the *office*?"

Surprisingly, news came the very next day. Charles called Carolyn late in the afternoon. "McCrory brought your bag around to the office. Someone found it in a trash bin in an alley off Glenwood Terrace. No money, of course, or credit cards. —Carolyn? Are you there?"

"Why didn't he bring it here?"

"I'd told him not to disturb you. Are you all right? Aren't you pleased?"

"Of course I'm pleased. Surprised, that's all."

"We'll go out to dinner tonight. The Blue Heron. You like it there."

When Charles handed her the bag, she seemed to take it with an air of faint repugnance. She made no move to open it.

"Aren't you going to check the contents?" he asked her.

"Didn't you?"

He laughed. "My dear, neither Detective McCrory nor I is qualified to make an inventory of a woman's purse. We only confirmed the money and cards were missing."

With a certain irate impatience, she opened it and rifled through its contents. A slight frown puckered her brows, then vanished. "The man obviously has no wife—at least not one who uses my shade of lipstick."

"Do you feel up to going out?" he asked, unfolding his paper.

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"Why shouldn't I? I'm neither bruised nor traumatized."

Yet she remained silent over dinner, preoccupied, murmuring only obligatory replies to Charles's comments about affairs at the office, the weather, all the monumentally inconsequential topics that had come to form the substance—or lack of substance—of their conversations.

"I was thinking a trip might do you good," he surprised her by saying. "A little holiday."

"It's something to think about," she replied vaguely.

"A cruise, maybe. Get your mind off everything."

"Everything?"

"What happened, I mean."

She rolled her eyes. "Charles darling, nothing *happened.* Will you please stop treating me as if I were a rape victim?"

He looked hurt. "I'm not totally insensitive to your moods, Carolyn. And you seem, well, distracted. Tense."

"Wouldn't *you* be if it had happened to you?"

The faintest hint of a smile touched his lips. "But, my dear, you said it yourself. Nothing did happen. Now then, what about dessert?"

The unsigned note arrived in the mail two days later, the envelope addressed to Carolyn in crude block letters.

"Dear Mrs. Wendell: I kept the letter I found in your bag. Hot stuff. You can have it back for $1000 in cash. Bring it to the Chinese Pavilion in Bellinger Gardens at 10 P.M. Saturday. You don't show up the letter goes to your old man."

Carolyn's first impulse was to reach for the phone, but on reflection she realized this would be too risky. The call would have to go through the switchboard, a chance she dared not take. The thought of ignoring the threat didn't cross her mind, yet she didn't feel more than a faint stirring of panic. It was as if subconsciously she might have been expecting something like this to happen from the moment she'd opened the bag and found the letter missing. Now she upbraided herself for not burning it at once, as she'd done with all the others. And this one, worse luck, was potentially more damaging than any. Her lover had never learned the meaning of the word restraint. Until now, she'd found that recklessness as exciting as his passion. With a shudder, she tried to imagine how she would have handled the situation had the mugger not stolen the letter and Charles been curious enough to examine it. It didn't bear thinking about.

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She was mulling over what course of action to take when the door buzzer sounded. She swore under her breath as she recognized Margaret's chirpy voice on the intercom. Just what she didn't need, a visit from her husband's secretary.

Margaret's plain, radiant face, with its barest trace of makeup, regarded Carolyn with a smile that was half sympathy, half apology. Carolyn looked at the overnight bag with dismay. "Going somewhere, dear?"

Margaret smiled. "I've *arrived.* Don't be angry, Carolyn. It was Charles's idea—he wouldn't take no for an answer. He insisted I park myself on you for a week. He seems to have it in his head you're in danger."

That was no lie, thought Carolyn. "What nonsense!" she said.

"Well, that awful creature does know your name and address, and he might have copied your keys. Charles worries about your being here alone."

"It's sweet of you both, Margaret, but I don't need a bodyguard. The notion's ridiculous."

Margaret nodded, all sympathy now. "Do me a favor, Carolyn. Humor him. You know what husbands are."

Carolyn had no choice but to settle Margaret in the guest room and fix her a bite of lunch. She felt she was being punished for having used Margaret on all those occasions as an alibi. Margaret, the innocent spinster secretary, wouldn't have dreamed that all those trips to the movies with the boss's wife were only an excuse for Carolyn to get away from the house—and, after the movie, making straight for Brad's apartment.

That night, when she was sure Charles was asleep, Carolyn stole downstairs and cautiously dialed the phone. Brad answered sleepily.

"Don't say a word," she whispered. "Just be quiet and listen carefully. That filthy mugger's sent me a note in the mail. He kept that last letter you sent me. It was in my bag. I know it was insane of me to keep it. Just be glad you didn't sign it. If Charles ever learned about us, God spare me the consequences. But what are we going to do? He's demanding a thousand dollars in cash for the letter or he'll send it to Charles. Even though you didn't sign it, you can guess what it would mean to our plans if it fell into Charles's hands."

"What exactly did his note say?"

Carolyn recited it from memory, then, when he was silent, she said: "Brad, there's no way I can get the money in cash by Saturday.

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Even if I could, I'd never dare meet with this man. At night? In the park? God knows what he might do after he gets the money."

"Now don't panic, love. I'll take care of it. Just be glad he didn't ask for more. If he knew what dynamite that letter might explode—"

"Sweetheart, I'm sorry I didn't burn it."

"I should never have written it. Never mind, the main thing is to get it back. God, I wish I could see you."

She told him about Margaret. "She's always been half in love with Charles—she's your typical lovesick secretary, though she does a good job of hiding it. She's pleased as punch to be watching over me like a mother hen, for *his* sake."

"Just leave it all in my hands," Brad said.

"I wish *I* were in your hands, right now."

"You soon will be, darling. Remember what I said in the letter."

Carolyn found Margaret's mealy-mouthed solicitude maddening, concealing her irritation only with the greatest effort of will. Margaret was so naive, so sweetly unaware.

"Charles is such a caring man," she murmured after he'd left for the office the next morning. "He's a dream to work for. He's going to find my absence a dreadful inconvenience. I just hope that temporary won't make an absolute shambles of everything. Of course, Bradley's secretary will keep an eye on things, though she is rather a fluffhead. What a difference between Charles and Brad. Brad's wonderfully handsome and terribly amusing, but he's not, you know, *solid*, like Charles."

"Maybe *you* should have married Charles," Carolyn couldn't help saying. "You're more his type." Dull dull dull.

Margaret's blush gave away her most secret fantasy and Carolyn found herself despising her almost as much as she despised Charles.

But at least Margaret's clickety-clack tongue and effusive, annoying helpfulness made it unnecessary for Carolyn to hide her preoccupation with the upcoming Saturday-night encounter between Brad and the anonymous blackmailer. She could almost pretend she wasn't there as Charles and Margaret indulged in their dreary shoptalk about the office and business affairs.

Carolyn's withdrawn manner provoked commiserating looks from Margaret at the dinner table. "Poor dear, you're very brave to try to hide it, but anyone with half an eye can see you haven't been yourself since that frightful experience."

Charles agreed. "A holiday, that's what you need. As soon as I

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sign the final papers relinquishing my half of the partnership to Brad, we'll both go away."

If he only knew, mused Carolyn. It was all she and Brad had been waiting for. Once the papers were signed she would ask for a divorce and go away alone. Then, after a discreet interval, she and Brad could begin seeing each other openly. Charles could do nothing about it.

On Saturday night, Margaret suggested a movie to get them all out of the house. She mentioned a film that had received rave reviews. "Just your sort of thing, Charles."

"I'll take a raincheck," said Charles. "I've got that infernal annual report to work on."

"Oh, then I'll help you with it," Margaret was quick to offer. Carolyn smirked. Diddling over a balance sheet with old Charles would thrill Margaret more than any film.

"You'll do no such thing," he objected. "You and Carolyn go to the movies. She needs to get out and I don't worry about her when she's with you."

They arrived back at the Wellington two hours later—in time to meet Detective McCrory as he stepped from his car, the worst of bad news written plainly on his face.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Wendell," he said. "There's been an accident."

Carolyn turned anxiously toward the door. He said: "Not here, Mrs. Wendell. But it involved your husband. Perhaps we'd better go upstairs."

In the apartment, Margaret took Carolyn's hand and led her to the sofa. McCrory remained standing. "I'm sorry to tell you your husband is dead, Mrs. Wendell. He died from a bullet wound an hour ago in Bellinger Gardens."

A strangled cry broke from Margaret's lips. Carolyn, white-faced, didn't utter a sound. "We have the perpetrator in custody," McCrory said. "An undercover detective patrolling the park heard the shot and nabbed the gunman before he could escape. His name is Bradley Winters—your husband's partner, Mrs. Wendell."

Margaret leaped up and turned on Carolyn. "You *bitch*—you *killed* him! You killed Charles!" And then, to the detective: "She may not have pulled the trigger, but it was her doing! Charles Wendell was my employer. He confided in me. He trusted me. He—he cared for me. Listen to me. When you returned his wife's bag to him, he found

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a letter in it, a letter from her lover. Charles had never guessed, he never knew. He didn't want her to know he'd read it, but he was determined to find out who the man was. The letter wasn't signed, you see. So Charles wrote a note to Carolyn pretending it was a demand for money from the man who mugged her. Charles knew that between us we could make sure Carolyn wouldn't have a chance to slip out and confront the man herself—tonight, as the note instructed her, in Bellinger Gardens. Charles felt certain that if Carolyn took the bait, she would most likely send her lover to retrieve the letter."

She turned her tear-stained face to Carolyn. "Oh, yes, it was all a charade about the movie. Charles fully intended to meet your lover as soon as I had you out of the way. Brad Winters! I can't believe it! To betray your husband with his own partner!"

Carolyn didn't move until the diatribe ended in a flood of tears. Then calmly, looking up at McCrory, she said, "She's lying. It can't have happened like that. Charles could never deceive me. He was too transparent. If he'd read that letter, I'd have known it."

Margaret glared at her with a malicious smile through her tears. "You think so? You think you're the only one capable of deceit? Oh, let me tell you! Charles was *delighted* to learn you had a lover—he was over the moon! It would make the divorce so much easier, so much less expensive. He could be rid of you and then there'd be only us!" She seized the detective's arm, her eyes imploring him to believe her. "Charles never dreamed he was taking any risk, he simply wanted to see if her lover would show up. And don't tell me they planned to pay off any blackmailer. Bradley went there to kill him."

"That's not true!" Carolyn cried. "He went there to buy back the letter. Didn't you find the money?"

McCrory shook his head. "There was no money, Mrs. Wendell." And then, assuming his most official manner: "Before you say any more, I think we'd all better go downtown."

"Q"

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a *NEW* Jojo story by

JEFFRY SCOTT

The lawyer raised an eyebrow at Jojo. "Sadly, it emerged that the will is a forgery, and rather a poor job, too. Having said too much, that is all I'm prepared to tell you."

"More than I had any right to expect," Jojo acknowledged. His reference to "when we were younger," from somebody ten years her senior and looking it, still rankled. But at least he had disclosed the nature of the trouble. The things I do for my friends, she told herself . . .

JOJO AND THE FORGED WILL

by JEFFRY SCOTT

Fingertips together—certain people feel obliged to act out their profession's stereotyping—Mr. Figgis said, "I so admired your work in the early days, when we were both younger. You were a real actress then."

Impudent as well as ungallant, Jojo noted. But needing his good will, she responded meekly, "Yes, I'm like that famous American bank robber, going where the money is. We all want to make our fortune one day, yes?"

"Some of us succeed." Mr. Figgis had a jeweler's eye for good stones and there was one on her finger. His wife being in the rag trade, Mr. Figgis took an intelligent interest, so he recognized the visitor's suit as a designer original.

Jojo gave the lawyer a dazzling smile. "So much for small talk. I try to look after my friends, and your client Mandy Taverner has a problem. In her case, discovering exactly what's going on seems a good start."

"Ex-client," he corrected neutrally. "The late William Prentice

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was my client. Miss Taverner was tardy over her parking fines and I sorted that out as a favor to Bill. When he died, with such a distressing aftermath, there was an obvious conflict of interest for me. And she agreed to seek a fresh source of legal advice."

"She may have agreed," Jojo said, "but she's done nothing about it. She phoned me at the crack of dawn, babbling about facing arrest. When I got my head together and went round to her flat, Mandy had done the vanishing trick."

Mr. Figgis's superior expression suggested that he wasn't surprised. On the other hand, he was at the business end of a plea from a gorgeous woman. "Look, off the record, without prejudice—"

"My favorite kind of information," Jojo assured him. "And though I chatter for a living, I know how to keep my mouth shut, too."

"Thank you. Not to mince matters, your friend Miss Taverner was Bill Prentice's kept woman. He paid the rent on her flat and much besides, one gathered." Remembering to steeple his fingers again, he continued, "Bill was no age when he died playing golf, hardly turned sixty. Hunterston Chase—lovely course. He'd nearly holed in one and perhaps the excitement was too much for him. Warning to us all." Smiling ruefully, he became more human. There was a golf bag propped against one of the filing cabinets.

"I'd urged Bill to make a will but, like most people who leave a muddle as much as an estate, he saw no need to hurry. However, soon after the funeral a will did turn up. When the lion's share—meaning the higher end of six figures—went to Miss Taverner, I was startled. She is a very, um—" Figgis paused uncertainly.

"Sexy piece," Jojo suggested.

"I'm much obliged. Exactly. On the other hand, she is younger than Bill's own daughter and they had been together for only a matter of months. Making her main beneficiary, virtually the only one, was bound to strike certain people as excessive. Bill Prentice has a daughter, Olive, as I mentioned, and a son. They were thunderstruck, naturally.

"Olive is headstrong." The lawyer's tongue prodded his cheek. "With a strong sense of family ties, in the financial sense. She went straight to the police with an allegation: the will was forged and Mandy Taverner had forged it."

He raised an eyebrow at Jojo. "Sadly, it emerged that the will *is* a forgery, and rather a poor job, too. Having said too much, that is all I'm prepared to tell you."

"More than I had any right to expect," Jojo acknowledged. That

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"when we were younger" from somebody ten years her senior, and looking it, still rankled. But at least he had disclosed the nature of the trouble. The things I do for my friends, she told herself.

"Whose side are you on?" Mandy Taverner demanded. She was stunning, even in ratty gilt boots, yesterday's jeans, and a drab T-shirt. Straight blue-black hair, almond eyes: Cleopatra slumming in the late Twentieth Century in the wine bar round the corner from her flat.

Jojo had found her there on a second combing of the neighborhood and taken her home to Park Lane for tea and not much sympathy. "Just answer the question," Jojo repeated patiently.

"No, I didn't fake that will!" Sprawled on the couch, Mandy was snappish. "As soon as the police showed it to me, I knew it wasn't—" she changed course abruptly "—anything to get worried about." She swung her feet, bare now, to the carpet. "Mind you, I deserve to be in Billy's will. I mean, credit where it's due, he was pretty long in the tooth and I *am* very tasty. He got a kick out of being seen with me, but there was less of a kick for moi. Not nice, guessing what everyone thought. Face it, they could guess what I saw in him, and it wasn't his youthful looks and vitality."

"Poor martyred you." Jojo shook her head helplessly. Mandy was an unashamedly amoral survivor and her honesty over the fact, far from admirable, made her hard to take at times. Dismissing momentary distaste—for this girl had stood by her once when good friends were scarce—Jojo advised, "Don't go laying that I-have-a-right-to-his-money stuff on the police."

"I'm not a fool." But Mandy had countered too swiftly and looked too stricken. So she had said that under interrogation already. No wonder she had phoned in a panic, hot from a session with the law.

"Mandy, be straight with me or I'm out of here." Jojo smiled. "No, you will be—I live here. You didn't fake that will?"

"How many more times? No."

"It never even crossed your mind," Jojo commented, skepticism blatant.

Mandy sniggered. "Sure it did. Crossed and kept moving. There was a temptation, no kidding. Billy took me into one of those shops selling legal stationery near the Law Courts a few months before he kicked the bucket and bought a will form. I said something about keeping a dog and doing your own barking—he had a solicitor for

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all that boring stuff. Billy said the form was so simple he didn't need a lawyer.

"Billy could be cunning, mark you. Okay, he'd set me up in the flat and settled my charge cards, providing I didn't go crazy at Harrods. But I was getting restless. He might have picked up those vibes and pulled the will-form stuff to keep me interested. Put the silly mare on Promised Land. That made my mind up to ditch him when the time was right. I've taken some very dodgy treatment in return for board and lodging, but I draw the line at being turned into a waitress eager for a tip.

"Then Billy snuffed it and I heard there was no will. All right, it did occur to me that I could buy a will-form and try a spot of creative writing." She treated Jojo to a candid look. "But it all seemed such a hassle, and risky besides."

"Then why are the police breathing down your neck?"

Mandy scowled. "That's thanks to Olive Prentice, Billy's darling daughter. A card-carrying bitch. *She* got them on my back—"

"I was astonished when Terry rang me," Mandy continued. "He's the son—quite hunky, actually. Lived at home with Billy, we know each other from my visits to Chez Prentice. Infrequent visits—Olive saw to that. She kicked up a fuss over me sullying Mummy's home: wanted Daddy to stay a widower, stands to reason. That woman lusted after his money—even moved into a bungalow next door to keep an eye on her expectations." Mandy smiled maliciously.

"After the funeral, which Olive took great pleasure in banning me from, I got this call from Terry. He was in a hell of a state, because he'd started clearing his father's part of their house and found a will. A will in my favor. Terry sounded shattered. He has his own business, import-export agency, so he doesn't need the money. Except that people always need the money, and more so when they have quite enough as it is.

"Of course, Olive went into bouncing-off-the-walls mode as soon as she heard, ranting that the will was a fake and I had to be the faker." Mandy widened her dark eyes. "Fantasy, luv. For the sake of argument, say I *had* forged that will. But I didn't have the run of Billy's house and I certainly didn't have a key. How in the world could I have planted the thing in a drawer of Billy's bedside cabinet for Terry to find?"

"Sorry about this," Jojo murmured insincerely, "but where there's a will—"

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"There's a way," her friend completed the proverb. "Thanks for the vote of confidence in my honesty."

"What confidence? Come on, sweetie, you have the ethics of a Corsican bandit, the finer feelings of a mugger on speed, and you can be worryingly resourceful. You see, I can't help thinking back to the summer of 'eighty-five and our famous Tuscany vacation. Remember that time we locked ourselves out of the villa? You borrowed my credit card, worked magic on the downstairs window, and got in, slick as any burglar. For the high end of six figures, to use the abominable Mr. Figgis's phrase, you are perfectly capable of burgling Prentice's house—to add a certain something instead of taking loot away."

Mandy's poise faltered. Anyone less vibrantly healthy would have looked haggard. But then she remembered her trump card. "The police don't think so. Oh, that dreary inspector or whatever he is, and a terribly butch woman detective gave me a hard time but they had to give up. They showed me the will and, yes, it's obviously bogus—the writing's all wrong, nothing like Billy's, really." She smirked and shrugged. "I told them I'd have made a damned sight better job of it than that."

"I don't get it, Mand," Jojo said. "You woke me a few hours ago, in the middle of the night, yelling for help. Now you're brushing the whole thing off. I wish you'd make up your mind."

"Seven o'clock, not dawn. It was dawn when they turned up on my doorstep and dragged me off to their wretched copper-shop to badger me on home ground. But at the end of it, they apologized. Well, the feller didn't, he stormed off—but the woman said they were sorry to have worried me and I could forget the whole thing."

Jojo, overtly casual, studied her friend. Could manipulative Mandy, so shrewd in some areas of life, be such an utter chump? Judging by that blithe smile—yes, she could. Reaching a private decision, Jojo announced that she had to dash off *instantly*, she was late for a costume fitting. Mandy might stay or go as she wished, just please be sure to slam the front door behind her.

While aware of the girl's pique over her sudden departure, Jojo feared that a lightly bruised ego was the least of Mandy's problems.

In bygone magistrates' court jargon, Joy Lorraine, actress, is Known to the Police. Not as disgraceful as it sounds: she does much charity work for them and it has won her any amount of Constabulary friends and contacts.

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Detective-Sergeant Babs Hyde protested, "You'll get me shot, asking me to discuss a case in progress, and with a civilian at that. No way. And don't bother telling me your credentials—I got the message from your high-ranking chum at the Yard. The snag is, I don't work for *him*."

Bitterness thinned and roughened her voice. "It's a matter of politics, see. Politics and sexism. Just because I have breasts—excuse the bluntness, but it's as daft and childish as that—plenty of colleagues make a hobby out of trying to catch me breaking regulations, letting emotion shade my decisions. And the chief hobbyist is a male-chauvinist porker by the name of Inspector Bledsoe, who happens to be my boss. Get the picture?"

Sergeant Hyde stopped there, out of breath rather than arguments. I hope she feels better now, Jojo thought. And aloud: "Not to worry, Babs. Archie said that Inspector Bledsoe is a wart on humanity's backside and advised me to try my luck with you instead. I can tell you'd have helped if you dared."

They were sitting over cups of coffee—only fools would *drink* the stuff—in a back-street cafe half a mile from the North London suburban police station of Regis Row. Sergeant Hyde was thirtyish, red-haired, with a broken nose almost perfectly repaired and a steady, measuring gaze. Wearing shabby slacks and anorak, cradling a bulging plastic carrier bag displaying a cheap supermarket's logo, she looked anything but a copper.

"He called Bledsoe a wart, did he? I like it. Jojo, you missed your calling in life, you ought to be selling something off a barrow. Okay, we'll talk. But if it ever gets back to Bledsoe, you're dead. Or will wish you were by the time I finish. Fair enough?"

"Deal," Jojo agreed. "Cards on the table: Mandy Taverner is a monster in many ways, most of them actually, but I owe her. She thinks she's in the clear—just because you told her so—whereas it wouldn't surprise me if she's neck-deep already, and about to sink, after being lulled off-guard."

A rustle as Babs Hyde leaned forward, confirming Jojo's hunch that the shopping bag was a prop, stuffed with crumpled newspaper. "You can't expect me to comment on what you just said." She gave a reluctant smile. "She's a piece of work, your chum—looks a million, loads of bottle, but not much prudence."

"If you mean that Mandy is rash enough to try something like this, I can't deny it. The awful part is, she *has* been up to something,

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Babs. There's no logical reason for saying it, but I am certain-sure that whatever her game, it was not over that will."

Sergeant Hyde blinked thoughtfully. "Funny, but I feel the same. When the daughter, Olive Prentice, came to us with the story, Miss Taverner was the obvious culprit. Except that me and Bledsoe really sweated her this morning and she never cracked. I know lies and liars, that's what you might call the lifeblood of this job. Mandy Taverner isn't lying, but she feels guilty about *something*."

Babs nipped her lower lip with her upper teeth. "I wish I could get a handle on it. There's something going on with that madam. For instance, soon as we showed her the bogus will, she cheered up no end, like a ton weight was off her back. Gave us a handwriting sample, no problem, though she'd been stalling until then."

Thinking back, Jojo assented. "That was the impression I got." Suddenly her skin tingled as enlightenment brushed a phantom feather down her spine.

"What?" Sergeant Hyde snapped—she could read eyes.

"I'm not sure. Blast, it's gone again. When I stop reaching, it will come to me. Honestly, I'm not stalling."

"Good." The other woman was sardonic. "Look, I don't rate her for this caper, but Inspector Bledsoe does, at the top of his voice. And he makes the decisions. An idea gets into his head, plenty of room to breathe, it doesn't leave in a hurry.

"He hates women, too. Pretty, sexy ones have no chance. A glorified hooker like our Mandy—no offense, I know she's your pal but we're talking bottom line—Bledsoe would love to get her sent away for a good long stretch in Holloway."

Wincing, Jojo remarked, "It's a thousand pities that Terence Prentice and not his sister found that will. From what I hear, Olive would have torn it up on the spot and told nobody. Which would have short-circuited all this bother."

Sergeant Hyde's glance was ambiguous, surprise conflicting with superiority. "Olive *did* find it, who told you different? She and her brother were clearing their dad's bedroom and she discovered the will in a shoebox at the back of a wardrobe. She showed it to Terence and he phoned Mandy. Then it was handed over to the solicitor, who passed it to us. Everything else in the shoebox—picture postcards, receipts, general rubbish—was years old. The will, on pristine white paper, stuck out like the proverbial sore thumb. That was fishy in itself, suggested that the thing had been planted, according to Olive Prentice."

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Then it came together for Jojo, between one breath and the next. Terence Prentice had phoned Mandy with the news, so Mandy had assumed he had found it. Now it was clear that Olive had produced the will, everything made sense.

Jojo was so pleased she quaffed the tepid coffee, regretting it. "*That's* why Mandy perked up when you showed her the bogus will!" she exclaimed. "A weight off her back, you said. It's so obvious."

"Try English," Sergeant Hyde jeered.

"Sorry. This morning Mandy gave me reasons against her planting a forged will 'in the bedside cabinet drawer.' But it wasn't found there. Olive's discovery was in a wardrobe. We've all been at cross-purposes, considering *the* disputed will because there must have been a pair of them!"

The supermarket bag rustled anew as Babs hugged it in excitement. "I knew Taverner had pulled some kind of stroke. Knew it! You're saying there were two forgeries: she did the first but we have another. No wonder she was pleased to see it. Not coming from her pen, it couldn't be traced back to her."

"That would account for her reaction."

Sergeant Hyde muttered, "Where does this leave us?"

"Call the bogus wills Fake A and Fake B. Mandy planted Fake A—why else was she certain it was in a drawer? For some reason, she counted on it being found, and not by Olive. But Olive did find it, hence the rest of what happened. She produced Fake B, which conveniently for her was transparently bogus."

"Hang about," Sergeant Hyde objected. "If Olive had Fake A safe, why bother with Fake B?" She answered her own question. "Malice, for starters. She loathes Taverner, makes no secret of it."

"There's more to it," Jojo argued. "Put yourself in Olive's place. Mandy had to be checkmated. She'd already forged one will. Olive destroyed it, no doubt, but what was to stop Mandy forging another, or rigging some kind of claim? Fake B was meant to be exposed as a forgery, stopping Mandy's game and, by way of a bonus, might put her behind bars."

"Far as I'm concerned, it flies," said Sergeant Hyde. "But this is just speculation. Brace of dumb birds dreaming stuff up, I can hear Inspector Bledsoe saying it."

"Not if you prove that Olive forged Fake B," Jojo urged. "Check it against her writing. And she must have bought one of those will-forms very recently. She couldn't have known she'd need it until she found Fake A."

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Sergeant Hyde was less impassive than she appeared. "It's worth a try, if I can sell bloody old Bledsoe on the idea. We never considered Olive Prentice. Why should she try sabotaging her own inheritance?"

"Are you crazy?" Mandy shrilled. Jojo had got home to find her still napping on the couch. "You told that she-copper I faked Billy's will? Thanks, friend. What do you do for an encore?"

"Calm down. Getting you off the hook depends on getting somebody else *on* it. Olive, for preference. Inspector Bledsoe plans a long resident season for you at Holloway. Which is a prison, not a theater, in case you wondered."

Mandy was pensive. And scared.

"Look, just between ourselves, none of your stool-pigeon nonsense, I did fake a will. It wasn't really dishonest. Billy would have wanted me to have something."

"To remember him by?" Jojo suggested sweetly.

"Cheap shot. He shouldn't have waved that will-form at me, putting the idea in my mind. And where was the harm? Terry has pots of money and Olive is a human vulture, she deserved a lesson."

"Where's the harm, she says. Giving you moral guidance is like teaching algebra to a poodle."

"Stop preaching, it's very tiresome," Mandy retorted crossly. "I worked like hell on that will. Hours of research at the public library, cracking be-your-own-lawyer books. It took dozens of tries before I got Billy's handwriting perfectly. It was a lovely will. Token sums of five thousand pounds to Terry and Olive, to spike their guns, and the rest for me. I got into the house while they were at the funeral and left the will-form under the paper lining in the cabinet drawer—I thought Olive would never find it there. I meant to sweet-talk Terry when Olive wasn't around and ask for a souvenir from Billy's things. Terry would have fallen for that, and I could have 'found' the will while Terry was there as a witness. Exit, laughing."

"You might be laughing all the way to court if I hadn't stepped in, you ninny!" Jojo regretted that stamping was such a camp, melodramatic gesture—she ached to stamp in frustration. "Crooked people can be so *stupid*, and amateurs are the worst."

"I expect you're right." Mandy slid off the couch and stretched, panther lithe. "Heigh-ho, places to go, people to see."

Jojo aimed a pistol forefinger. "Not on your life. You stay here, out of mischief, for as long as it takes. I promised Babs Hyde that

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you will be available if needed. And she's your only hope, so let's play fair with her."

"Sorry to keep you waiting. I know I said I'd come over straightaway, but everything took longer than expected. Always does, after an arrest." Sergeant Babs Hyde sounded groggy with tiredness on arrival at Jojo's flat two nights later.

"Come in, take your shoes off, have a drink."

"Music to my ears." Sergeant Hyde groaned softly, kicking off a shoe. "Whopping great gin and tonic, please. Two of 'em for preference, same glass—save you trouble with refills."

Levering the other shoe free, she spotted her fellow guest. "Hello, Miss Taverner."

Reply inaudible, Mandy sidled toward the front door. Babs, subsiding on the couch, was mockingly cheery. "Don't get your knickers in a twist—you're in the clear. More by luck than good judgment, but who's counting?" She accepted a brimming tumbler, noisy with ice. "Coo, I need this. Cheers, my dears!"

"Arrest," Jojo prompted.

"Correct. We got Olive Prentice. Long story, I'll keep it short. There was enough handwritten material in her statement contesting the will for a comparison to be made. The experts found seventy percent probability that she was the forger. That gave me leverage on Bledsoe to continue my investigation.

"There aren't that many shops selling law stationery. Olive went to a place off Fleet Street, dusty little hole. Girl behind the counter has half the brainpower of your average amoeba but she remembered a recent customer showing her the top portion of a printed will-form, torn off, and demanding a form in exactly the same style.

"Like I said, the girl wasn't bright, so she didn't see anything suspicious in that. What she did notice was Olive's monogram brooch, diamond chips spelling out 'OP' on a gold backing. She identified Olive's photo from a selection of half a dozen faces. Not Brain of Britain, but a good witness in her fashion.

"Next move, Bledsoe and I call on Olive—with a search warrant for company. Daft biddy had kept the top half of what I'm confident was Fake A in her bureau. We'd established her purchase of the will-form, there was the strong suggestion that Fake B came from her fair hand. Olive went to pieces—tantrum followed by hysteria followed by acting short of a full deck. It's an act, for my money, but that's for a jury to decide. The point is that she made a full admission

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after caution—so that's another one done and dusted, all cleared away.

"She found a will in the bedside cabinet leaving the bulk of Daddy's estate to—" the policewoman was deadpan, though she rolled an eye in Jojo's direction " '—that little whore who hooked my father when he went senile,' is how Olive tells it. She tore it up, keeping the Last Will and Testament heading, bought a similar form, and created a document bound to be rejected." Sergeant Hyde inspected her glass. "Goodness, that went quick. No more, thanks, that was more than my ration. But I had to celebrate. Inspector Bledsoe approves of me, for a change. Even said I have the makings of a proper copper. Patronizing little toad. Big case, see, he can grab the glory, pretend that he was onto Olive Prentice from the start."

Jojo was alerted by a single word. "Big case? Not that big, surely?"

The policewoman, flexing her stockinged toes, said, "That full statement was fuller than we had expected. Well, Olive was upset, going on raving, at being caught out over the forgery. Yes, she destroyed a will that had been tucked into the bedside cabinet. She hadn't gone through all this, risked all this, to be cheated of her reward.

"Do him justice, Inspector Bledsoe picked up on that nearly as fast as I did. Risked what, gone through what? Bear in mind that her father died unexpectedly—she hadn't nursed and worried over him for months. So what was she on about? Bledsoe can make a statue talk when he applies himself. No rough stuff, never raises his voice even, just persistent. Chinese water torture with a Clark Gable moustache and a touch of religion: 'You'll feel so much better with a clear conscience.' When Bledsoe started talking about getting an exhumation order, Olive knew it was all over.

"Mr. Prentice, rest his soul, had fun with his precious will-form, but he paid for it. He used it to keep Mandy sweet, and to rap his daughter's knuckles. He was sick of her ogling a dead man's shoes, showed her the blank form, and said his children would get reasonable farewell gifts but the rest was earmarked for charity."

Sergeant Hyde, talking at Mandy without looking her way, broke off to explain, "That's how, when Olive discovered what purported to be Prentice's will in his bedside drawer, she knew it must be a fake. Because days before, Olive's father had stated exactly where his money was going—not to her nor Terence in any great amount, and Mandy simply didn't feature."

Jojo and the policewoman pretended not to hear a third person's

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sigh of relief after Babs said, "Of course, Olive tore up the will she found, so even if it was forged with intent to defraud nothing can be done about it now.

"Getting back to Olive. It doesn't seem to have struck her that Mr. Prentice could have been tormenting her, or might simply change his mind later. So she killed him. Prentice always had breakfast with Olive before playing golf. Olive does hospital welfare work, knows Dallingyham General better than most of the doctors. She slipped into the dispensary, stole something lethal, and spiked her father's tea." Sergeant Hyde's face, already bleak, distorted in a grimace. "Daddy's girl!"

The long silence was broken by Mandy Taverner.

"Billy had his own will form, I wonder what happened to that." She sounded wistful, innocent, a simple child asking for information. Jojo knew what was coming next.

"Supposing he filled it out? I know he wanted me to have something. Quite a lot, I expect. He was such a generous man. And we did think the world of each other. If he did write it, and if it should happen to turn up, after all, I might get—"

"Four years minimum, old dear," Babs Hyde finished for her drily. And to Mandy's fury, the more she protested, the greater their amusement.

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a ***NEW*** short story by

JOAN HESS

The door looked as if it had always been there between the bookcase and the television. A really logical location for a door. If there was a separate bedroom in the apartment, it would be in this precise location. But it was a one-room apartment.

Joan Hess has published ten mysteries with St. Martin's Press, two young-adult mysteries for Silhouette, and short stories with Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine *and* Sisters in Crime 2 . . .

ANOTHER ROOM

by JOAN HESS

I come in, tired, frumpy, and disheveled, with my purse, my briefcase, a newspaper, the mail, a sack of groceries, another sack with several bottles of booze, everything all clutched in my arms or in my coat pockets or in my hands, along with my keys. But this is pretty much how I come home every night to my new apartment, and, as far as I can see into the future, the way I always will.

The day has been worse than a nightmare. I am delayed on the subway—not my fault—but this makes me late, and then I can't find the folder with the demographic data before the conference. I know it's on or in my desk, but I can't put my hands on it and my boss gives me this grim look and shakes his head and I feel like a sorority girl who missed curfew. I'm so rattled I spill coffee on my beige suit.

Then my secretary starts in on her personal problems and ends up sobbing in the ladies room most of the morning while I field the telephone. My first client shows up late, which means my second client has to wait, and all this results in a log jam in the reception room—by noon every last person in the office is snickering and I feel

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like a damn fool. They're lucky I don't have an assault weapon and a lot of ammunition.

But the thing is, I stagger into the apartment, dump my briefcase and the sacks on the sofa, throw my coat on the chair, and automatically hit the play button on the answering machine because I'm supposed to have drinks and dinner with Eddie unless he has to cancel. This is when I see the door.

The problem is that I've never seen this door before. I rented the apartment about a month ago. It's not "condo," but it's all I can afford, this one-room number in the Village. The neighborhood's relatively safe and has a lot of character. The building's old, which means the radiators are balky antiques, but I had to find something after the divorce and opted to pay too much for something trendy so the ex would know I was doing fine on my own.

I blink, but the door doesn't go away. I push everything aside, sink down on the sofa, and rub my forehead. The wall's been there all along, naturally, holding up the ceiling and blocking the view into my neighbors' bedroom. I can hear them, though. They fight, they make up, and then they do a lot of things that make me uncomfortable, but I can't bang on the wall and tell them they're disgusting. There's no law that says you can't behave like mindless animals, that you can't grunt and groan and shriek things that should not be overheard by disinterested parties lying on a murphy bed all of ten inches away.

But I digress. I'm sitting in the middle of the living room, a bunch of bills in my hand, my machine grinding out messages, and I'm staring at this door. Wood, with top and bottom panels, a doorknob —your basic door. But I'm renting an efficiency apartment in a renovated building and this door is not supposed to be there.

It looks as if it's always been there, right between the bookcase and the television. A really logical location for a door. If there were a separate bedroom, it would be in this precise location. I try to think. I'm fairly certain I'd hung a print there—nothing great, just a Cezanne that I'd picked up years ago. The table with the telephone is now to one side, but it had been centered along the wall as recently as this morning when I rushed out to the subway.

So I'm just sitting, staring at this door. I feel silly, but I look at the baseboards to check for signs of sawdust. I see ten years of dust. My ex used to complain about our baseboards, as if all I did every day was lie on the couch, stuff my face with chocolates, and think of ways to aggravate him when he came home from his hard day at

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the office. The only thing he forgot was that I'd had a hard day at the office, too. I'm as driven as he, and a damn sight smarter, although that was an issue I tactfully left unexplored.

I'm still staring at this door. Now I think of all sorts of people to call, but I'm having an awkward time with the imagined conversations. It's well past noon, so the super's drunk. My ex is in the Bahamas with his child bride. If I call my mother and say, "Hey, Mom, guess what I found?" she'll be on the next bus from Jersey City, commitment papers in her hot little hand. The more I imagine the announcement that I've just discovered a new room in my apartment, the more I can feel the coarse cotton straitjacket and see the solicitous smiles behind the hypodermics.

I need to think about it. I pour myself a stiff drink of Scotch, move the groceries to the kitchen area, empty the ashtrays, gather up the newspapers from last week, stuff dirty laundry in the closet, and sort of wander around keeping an eye on the door.

It's beginning to get dark, and I seem to think Eddie's going to show up soon. I don't remember making the date, but he called yesterday to remind me, which was rather clever of him. He knows I forget things, especially when I'm under all this pressure at the office and not delighted that the ex is remarried and hating to answer the telephone because I'm afraid it's my mother and I simply don't have the energy to deal with her steady stream of criticism. My shrink gave me a relaxation tape and a prescription refill, but I don't really want to relax and I can't take the pills when I'm drinking.

Okay, I tell myself. Open the door and see what's there.

After a minute, I pour myself another drink and sit down directly across from the door. I decide to count to one hundred, then just get up, walk across the room, and open it.

When I get to fifty, I consider waiting until Eddie shows up so we can open the door together. At seventy-five, I consider calling my shrink, but I know from experience I'll get the damn answering service.

Ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred.

My knees aren't at their steadiest, and my hand is shaking as I pour myself another drink, but I go over and make myself try the doorknob. I don't know what I'm expecting—maybe a jolt of electricity or for the door to fly open and a bunch of people from the office to shout, "Surprise!" even though it's not my birthday and we

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all know I'm not going to see a promotion anytime soon, not after this morning's disastrous conference.

The door isn't locked. I turn the knob very slowly, for some reason feeling it's important not to make a sound, and ease the door open.

The room is dark. I'm not about to set foot inside a dark room that wasn't there nine hours ago. I let go of the knob and feel for a switch.

I find one and flip it up. A light fixture on the ceiling goes on and I'm standing in the doorway of a bedroom. I take one step inside, then stop to study the room. It's small and cozy. There are no windows. There is a single bed, neatly made, and beside it a table with a lamp. A dresser, its surface pristine and well polished, and a mirror above it. A wardrobe. An easy chair. An old-fashioned braided rug.

I feel a rush of iciness as it occurs to me that someone might be crouched behind the door. I take a deep breath, let it out slowly, and then look behind the door. All I see is a print on the wall. The Cezanne, oddly enough.

I have to finish the drink before I can go any farther. A little courage—or is it bravado?—sinks in, and I tiptoe to the middle of the room. Although it is exceedingly tidy, there is a sense that it is occupied, although not by a slob like myself. The cushion on the armchair has a slight indentation—someone sits in it, perhaps reading or gazing pensively at the Cezanne.

I'm certain this room doesn't belong to the perverts. There is no other door, not even a closet door, so the only entrance is from my apartment. I get this really bizarre scenario about the previous tenant refusing to leave and vowing to live with me, but without my knowledge. I can almost see her sneaking in and out at night when I'm asleep not ten feet away on my bed, using her front-door key so very cautiously that there's not so much as a tiny click to awaken me.

Yes, the room belongs to a woman. The bedspread isn't ruffly but it has a pleasantly feminine appearance, and now I notice that the chair is upholstered in matching material. On the dresser, there's a vase with an artful arrangement of silk flowers.

I approach the dresser. Unlike mine, there is no dust or scattering of blonde hairs, no jumbled makeup or junk jewelry or bills and work from the office and that sort of accumulation that grows day by day.

I open the top drawer. Here is makeup, but in a compartmentalized tray. Scarves, each folded into a neat bundle. Several small jewelry-

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store boxes. An unused wallet, still in a box. A few odds and ends of jewelry in yet another compartmentalized box.

She is compulsive about order, I deduce in my best Sherlockian manner. I close that drawer and open the one below it. The sweaters are folded in uniform stacks. I continue to open the drawers and find that each is orderly. Unlike myself, she doesn't have to dig through a drawer every morning to find clean underwear and usable pantyhose. My shrink tells me almost every session that I'll experience less stress if I attempt a degree of organization, both in my apartment and in my mind. I always laugh and assure him that even in the midst of the chaos I know where everything is and that I prefer it that way.

Suddenly I want to burrow through all this neatness, and even pull the drawers out and dump their contents on the floor. Throw the scarves in the air and let them flutter to the floor in a rainbow puddle. Let the makeup clatter on the floor and roll under the chair and dresser. Jump up and down on the bed as if I were a naughty child. Yell profanities to disrupt the ambience of utter serenity.

I quickly close the drawer before I give way to the urge to undo this compulsive woman's handiwork. I am sweating, though, and in the mirror I notice my paleness as I drain the last few drops in the bottom of the glass, wishing for more.

If I leave the room and go to the kitchen to replenish my drink, will the room still be here when I return? If I stay here, will she come back and find me in her bedroom? If she does return, she'll be displeased to find an intruder in her tidy, compartmentalized world. Especially an intruder with dirty hair, a coffee splotch on her skirt, sweat stains on her blouse, a run in her pantyhose. An intruder who battles urges with Scotch.

I abruptly go out of the room and into the kitchen, where the sight of the bottle helps ease my uneven breathing and my anger. I manage to splash whisky into the glass without spilling it and gulp it down. I put the glass in the sink. Will the room still be there?

Yes. I go to the wardrobe and open its doors. Of course everything hangs neatly and the shoes are aligned in precise rows. The woman dresses well, although with modest discretion. She doesn't stuff dirty clothes in the dark corners and then forget to take them to the laundromat. She is too fine a gentlewoman to wad up sweatshirts and jeans. Her shoes have no mud on them. Her purses, arranged on the shelf, don't have broken zippers and torn straps.

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I'm beginning to like her less and less, this trespasser. For that is what she is. It is my apartment, my lease, my extra locks on the door, and my continual fight with the super to fix the leak in the bathroom. Who is she to hide in this orderliness? Why shouldn't she share my frustration when the radiator goes cold and the dripping faucet reverberates and the animals next door begin to groan?

Who she is is what I intend to find out. I slam the wardrobe door and go to the bedside table. Maybe I'll find an envelope with her name, or a perfectly balanced checkbook with her name—and our shared address beneath it. I yank open the drawer with enough anger to make it screech.

There is a Bible. So she is pious and self-righteous, I think hotly. She knows I stopped going to church years ago, when I found the confession box claustrophobic and the platitudes nauseating. I can almost see her kneeling in a pew, her gloved hands clasped together, her face aglow with the inner radiance of a madonna.

I snatch up the Bible and open it to the first page to see if her name is written there in perfect script. Nothing. I throw the Bible on the bed and don't give it a second glance as it falls to the floor. She can pick it up and replace it herself.

I feel in the back of the drawer and blink as my hand withdraws, holding a small gun. I have a gun that resembles this one very closely. I bought it when I first moved to the neighborhood. I think it's in the bottom drawer of my dresser, under the sweaters and scarves. Or maybe in the back of a kitchen cabinet.

At least she's worried about being mugged, I think as I examine the gun to determine that it's loaded. Like me, she must lie awake at night listening to the horns blaring and the occasional arguments in the street below, or to the rhythmic squeals of the bed in the next apartment. Like me, she has nights when she can't sleep, when the sheets become damp and the blanket is twisted like a snake around her legs.

I feel better as I imagine her fear. She may not live in a chaos of dirty clothes, unpaid bills, dishes in the sink, dustballs on the floor, and calls from nosy relatives, but she still has a malignancy that swells in the dark and evokes demons.

I decide to steal her gun. Then she'll be even more frightened. After a few nights of insomnia, she'll be clumsy and scatter powder on her dresser. She'll leave clothes on the chair, forget to replace her makeup in the tray, decide it's easier to leave the bed unmade.

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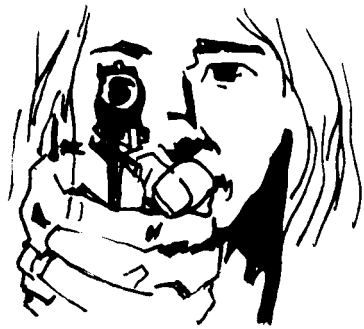
I start for the door, smiling to myself. Then I glance at the dresser, and above it I see her. I halt, catch my breath, and move cautiously forward until I'm facing her. Her hair color is much like mine, but she is wearing it in a stylish cut and it shines in the light. She is at least twenty pounds slimmer. Her face is not bloated. Her eyes are clear, with no trace of the redness that greets me every morning.

The worst thing is that she's smiling. It speaks of contempt, and I know that she compares my hair, my face, my body, and my clothes with hers and that she feels superior. She sees the ugly clutter in my room beyond the doorway.

I decide to show her just how messy life can be. I put the barrel of the gun in my mouth. Now I'm going to wait just a minute until I can see that she's beginning to comprehend what I'm about to do. Then I'm going to splatter brains and blood all over the ceiling and walls of her perfect, tidy bedroom.



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a *NEW* Michael Vlado story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

"Is this one of your Gypsy shivs?" Lieutenant Rizzoli asked Michael, gesturing toward the dagger in a plastic evidence bag that rested on the table between them. He said "shiv" in English, though he spoke in Italian. Michael wondered if he knew that the slang word came originally from the Romany word for blade. He didn't really need to know, because to him Gypsies and knives were practically the same.

"I never saw that dagger before," Michael answered truthfully. "It's not a Gypsy weapon . . ."

THE GYPSY DELEGATE

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Michael Vlado was working back in the field on the day that Captain Segar of the government militia drove up through the hills to seek him out. It was January and there was little farming to be done, but the horses Michael raised always needed tending to. His wife Rosanna was in the house and she rang the dinner bell to summon him.

Word had reached the Gypsy village of Gravita of the stark events of previous weeks, when the uprising of the Romanian people had ousted the country's leaders and led to the Christmas Day execution of the former President and his wife. Trudging back across the frozen earth, Michael caught a glimpse of Captain Segar standing in the doorway with Rosanna and his first thought was that his old friend had been dismissed by the new government. The familiar militia uniform was missing and Michael could see that under his dark-blue overcoat Segar wore a conservative business suit like those he'd seen worn by government officials.

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"Are you out of a job?" he asked, shaking hands with his friend.

Segar smiled. "I'm out of the militia, but into a better job with the new government. I'm an official in charge of this region. I may have to run for election, depending upon the wording of the new constitution, but for now—"

"Congratulations!" Michael said, meaning it. "You're exactly the sort of official our new government needs."

"If I can get through my first month without being shot, perhaps there's some hope." Segar's face turned serious. "But I didn't drive up here for your congratulations, Michael. The new government has a mission for you."

"For me—a Gypsy? The former President never looked on us with any great favor."

"Things have changed, believe me. Remember King Michael?"

"I was only a baby at the time, but I was named after him."

"You know he was forced to abdicate at the end of nineteen forty-seven when the Communists took over the government. But did you know he was still alive?"

"Michael, alive?" Somehow the idea surprised him. "He'd be—what?—almost seventy years old now. Where has he been?"

"Living in exile in Geneva. He has offered to return if the Romanian people want him."

"As a king? Do the people really want that?"

"Of course not. They want their freedom, along with the rest of Eastern Europe. But the new government feels it might be wise to send a delegation to Geneva. It would be an unofficial delegation, of course, without notice to the press. Because of my familiarity with the Gypsy villages in this area, I was asked to nominate a Gypsy delegate. I suggested you."

"Me!"

"They want a five-man delegation representing various groups. When it was decided one representative should be a Gypsy, I immediately thought of you, Michael. Naturally the chosen one should be a Gypsy king, to meet with our deposed king, and you know yourself that many of the others are elderly and unable to travel. You are a vigorous man, only in your mid-forties."

"What would this involve?" Michael asked with some misgivings.

"You would meet your companions at an orientation session in Bucharest next Monday and then proceed by train to Geneva."

"Wouldn't flying be faster?"

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Segar shrugged. "Dr. Vincenti, chairman of the delegation, does not fly."

"How long would I be away?"

"You would be back here by Friday."

Even before discussing it with Rosanna, Michael knew he would go. It wasn't every day one got to meet a deposed king, and one's own namesake.

On Monday morning, Michael met the other four delegates in an ornate, high-ceilinged room at the Palace of Culture. It was the Minister of Culture who spoke to them, explaining first that the President was otherwise occupied. "We must realize that these are trying times for our nation, and for all of Eastern Europe. You five have been chosen to make a delicate, unofficial visit to our deposed king. Of course, to reinstate him in his former position is out of the question, but with demonstrators still in the streets we must investigate every avenue that could lead to stability. Perhaps a conciliatory statement from him might help our situation."

Michael found his thoughts wandering to the other four seated with him. They would be his companions for the next few days. All were dressed conservatively, though he wore a red high-necked tunic under a dark-blue suitcoat. Dr. Vincenti, a tall man with a silvery white beard, had been the first to introduce himself. He was the official spokesman for the group and had known King Michael in his youth. Now, at seventy, he was a distinguished educator who'd managed to stay clear of government involvement for much of his life.

Michael's main attention was directed toward the lone female in their group. Slava Botosana's conservative grey suit and white blouse couldn't hide the fact that she was an exceptionally attractive woman in her thirties. Her dark hair was nicely styled and her makeup carefully applied—something one rarely saw in the villages of Michael's area. As if to counteract the plainness of her suit and blouse, she wore fashionable shoes with three-inch heels, and an expensive leather briefcase, probably purchased in the West, leaned against the leg of her chair. As the cultural minister spoke, she made notes with a slim gold pencil.

The younger of the other two men, a representative of the Romanian Workers' Alliance, was quite outspoken. His name was Petru Grazu, and Michael guessed his age to be about thirty. He was

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blond and handsome, with Germanic features that marked him as one of the nation's two-percent minority from the Banat region.

"What route will we be taking to Geneva?" he wanted to know.

The minister didn't seem pleased at the interruption. "You leave this afternoon by train to Belgrade. There you change to the Direct-Orient Express, which will carry you to Geneva, with stops at Trieste, Venice, and Milan. The train actually stops at Lausanne, but that's only sixty miles along Lake Leman from Geneva—a very scenic bus ride."

"Is Michael expecting us?"

"Of course. We have been in communication with him. It is best to avoid the media, however—we do not want it known that a delegation has gone off to see the deposed king, even on an informal basis."

It was the fifth member of the group, a balding man about Michael's age, who broke in to say, "Referring to two Michaels is confusing. It may help our new friend Michael Vlado if we refer to the other as King Michael, though we realize he will never hold that title again."

Michael smiled at the man and shook his hand. "I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name."

"Constantine Aman. I was director of the Art Museum of Romania until the former President dismissed me for deviation from the strict party line. Now I am back in the government's good graces—as long as there is a government."

As the meeting was breaking, Michael sought out Slava Botosana. "Did I hear someone say you were an actress?"

She laughed softly, and he found it a pleasant sound. "Once I was. Now I am on the governing board of the national theater. I believe they chose to include me only because I am a woman. They wish to charm King Michael into making a statement on behalf of the new government, and I have a reputation for charming men, even those nearing seventy."

Michael reflected. "We're a mixed group. An educator, an actress, a workers' representative, a former museum director—"

"And a Gypsy king." She said it with a smile. "I thought you would be a bearded old man with a limp."

"Our old king was too old, with too much of a limp. He was confined to a wheelchair and I was pretty much running things, conducting the Gypsy court, deciding issues that affected our people. Then some-

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one killed the old king in a robbery and the title passed to me. I was surprised the people chose me, but I am grateful for it."

"Why don't you travel around in caravans like other Gypsies?" she wanted to know.

"Some of my people do, but Romanian Gypsies have never been as nomadic for some reason. We have settled here in the hills, farming the land and raising horses."

"So now you are a statesman!"

Michael held up his hands in protest. "No, no—only a poor Gypsy. I hope you will put up with me for the next few days."

They were in Belgrade that evening, changing trains while the last of the daylight faded. As the train pulled out of the station, Michael saw leafless trees outlined against the dark-blue sky and, for a time, a pack of wild dogs chasing alongside.

"What is it, Gypsy?" Dr. Vincenti asked, watching the dogs. "An omen?"

"Only if you believe in omens. I am one Gypsy who does not."

"But if something bad happens—"

Michael shrugged. "It will be a coincidence." He looked at Vincenti. "What is it that bothers you about our trip?"

"This is a time of great uncertainty for the Romanian people, Michael. The government situation is still fluid, with several factions fighting for control. Some think the old government hardliners might even try for a comeback. If that were the case, they might begin by assassinating the deposed King Michael."

"Why do that? There's no chance he'll return as our ruler."

"No, but he could become a symbol. Sometimes symbols can be as dangerous as omens, for those who believe in them."

There was a little smile on his lips as he spoke the words, but Michael thought about the exchange that night when he was trying to sleep.

In the morning he had time for only a shave and a quick breakfast before the train arrived in Venice. Michael was sharing a compartment with Grazu and Aman, while the elderly Dr. Vincenti and Slava Botosana had private compartments of their own. The woman and the two younger men joined him for breakfast, and later when he stopped by Vincenti's compartment he found the man studying some papers he'd spread out on the lift-up table with which each compartment was equipped.

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"No breakfast today?" Michael asked him.

"Perhaps later. I must prepare my remarks for our meeting with King Michael."

"I think I'll take a look around the station here in Venice."

"Don't get left behind."

Michael found himself in the company of the young man, Petru Grazu, as he left the train to stretch his legs. "Have you ever been to Venice before?" he asked Michael.

"Never."

"How many more borders do we have to cross?"

"Only the Swiss border, after our stop in Milan."

"The policemen at the Yugoslav border really annoyed me. They treated us all like some sort of criminals despite our diplomatic passports."

"It is not an entirely pleasant experience," Michael agreed. "But at least the food is reasonably good."

The outspoken labor representative nodded. "For a time in the Seventies, there wasn't even a dining car on the *Orient Express*. Passengers had to obtain food and drink from vendors on station platforms. At least it's better now, though the train will never recapture all of its lost glory."

"You sound like a capitalist," Michael observed.

"Hardly!"

A while after they reboarded the train for the depressing journey out of Venice, crossing the oil-slick lagoon to enter a vast flatland of refineries and factories, Slava came along the corridor and joined them. "How long to Milan?" she asked.

"We should be there early this afternoon," Grazu told her. "Is Vincenti still working, do you know?"

"I think so."

Constantine Aman was just coming out of Dr. Vincenti's compartment as Michael and Grazu moved down the corridor. He brushed back the thin hair on his forehead and turned to say, "I'll check in with you when we reach Milan."

"Still working?" Grazu asked.

"Yes. He doesn't wish to be disturbed for a while."

Aman wanted another cup of morning coffee, so Michael accompanied him through the train to the dining car. "Are we really accomplishing anything with this journey?" he asked the museum director.

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Aman eyed him critically as they found seats at one of the tables. He took out a felt-tip pen and removed a small pad from his inner pocket. With a few rough strokes he drew a crude pie chart. "You see this tiny wedge, Michael? This is the percentage of Romanians who are Gypsies. Only two hundred and thirty thousand by the last census. The very fact that you are here, included in this mission, accomplishes something for your people."

Michael took the pen and marked off a larger segment of the pie. "Most Gypsies in the country have settled down in one spot. They consider themselves Romanians and many have good reason not to declare themselves as Gypsies. Most estimates place their number at over a million."

"Good reason?"

"The Nazi death camps were not just for Jews."

"That was fifty years ago."

"Gypsies have long memories."

Slava came in then, looking puzzled. "Has either of you seen Dr. Vincenti? He wanted my opinion of his opening statement to King Michael and he promised to stop by my compartment."

"He was still working on it when I left him a few minutes ago," Aman told her.

"In his compartment? I knocked on the door and called his name, but no one answered."

"He told me he didn't want to be disturbed," Aman told her.

"But surely he would have answered."

"I'll go check on it." Michael left them and walked back to the next car where their compartments were located. He knocked on Vincenti's door but there was no answer. Then he turned the knob, found it was unlocked, and pushed it open.

Vincenti was lying on his side on the seat, his distinguished head toward the closed windows. In front of him on the desktop was spread the penciled draft of the remarks he'd been working on. Michael took a step closer, reaching out a hand to the man who seemed to be sleeping.

Then he saw the blood, and the slim dagger plunged into his right side.

Michael found Petru Grazu alone in their compartment. The younger man came alert when he saw the intensity of Michael's expression. "What is it?"

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"Dr. Vincenti has been murdered in his compartment. Stand by the door while I get the others."

He hurried back to the dining car, where he was surprised to see Constantine Aman holding Slava's hand across the table. When he saw Michael, Aman got quickly to his feet. "What's the trouble?"

"Someone's killed Vincenti—come quickly!"

"Oh, no!" Slava gasped.

Grazu, awaiting his return, stepped aside as Michael pushed the compartment door open and allowed the others to enter. "Don't touch anything," he cautioned. "We don't want them blaming one of us for this."

Grazu turned to face him. "Who *should* they blame? Surely it must be obvious to you that we are the only suspects. Who else even knew we were traveling on this train?"

"Someone might have followed us," Slava argued, "and wants to disrupt our mission."

"They've certainly done that," Aman said. "There's no way we can continue without Vincenti."

"Why do you say that?" Grazu bristled as if his personal honor was at stake. "I will lead the mission if no one else does. We have come too far to turn back now."

"Let's deal with his death first," Slava insisted. "The conductor must be notified."

"The police will delay us for questioning," Michael pointed out.

She gave him an exasperated look. "He'll be found when we cross the Swiss border, anyway. I'm going to find the conductor right now."

She was gone before anyone could object.

"Perhaps he was robbed," Aman suggested.

Michael moved closer to the body. "I'll see if his money's been taken. You both can witness that I removed nothing from him."

"I don't know," Grazu said with a twisted smile, "Gypsies are fast with their fingers."

Michael ignored the remark and surveyed the area around Vincenti's body. The desktop was clear of everything except the three sheets of paper on which the dead man had been writing. There was nothing on the floor and nothing on the seat next to the body. Michael felt in the crevice between the seat and its back, but not even a coin or a gum-wrapper was hidden there. Next he checked the dead man's pockets. His wallet, containing the currency they'd been issued for the journey, seemed to be intact. Otherwise, his pockets contained only the usual objects—a handkerchief, keys, a case for his eye-

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glasses, a few Romanian coins, a pen, and a notebook that had a section for addresses.

Michael turned his attention to the topcoat that hung near the compartment door. In one pocket he found gloves, in another a slender vial of blood-pressure pills.

"Where's his passport?" Grazu asked.

That had been bothering Michael, too. He wondered if the old man might have been killed for it. Then he spotted the overnight bag on the rack above the seat. He lifted it down carefully and opened the unlocked snaps on either end. The passport was lying on top of a clean shirt and pajamas. "Here it is. Nothing seems to be missing."

"Unless the killer took something we didn't know about."

"That's always a possibility." Michael went quickly through the bag, turning once toward the two men. "One of you stand outside in case Slava comes back with the conductor. I don't want him walking in on me like this." But the overnight bag contained nothing except a few articles of clothing, a toothbrush, toothpaste, a comb and brush, and a small scissors, perhaps for trimming his beard.

Aman had stepped outside, and Grazu remained. "Didn't he have any background information on the meeting?" he asked Michael.

Michael got down on his hands and knees to make certain no sheet of paper had fallen beneath the seat or into the heating unit. "There's nothing here. Perhaps Slava has the material in her briefcase."

Slava entered then, pushing past Aman with the train conductor in tow. The conductor stared at the body as if he'd never seen a dead man before. "This is terrible! We'll radio ahead to Milan and request instructions." As he was retreating out the door, he seemed to remember his duties. "You three clear out and I'll lock the compartment."

They went down the corridor to Slava's compartment. "What will we do now?" Aman said.

"I told you!" the younger Grazu sputtered. "I will lead the mission if no one else does! King Michael has been told of our arrival and we must appear as scheduled!"

Aman was doubtful. "I don't know. If one of *us* killed Dr. Vincenti, perhaps there *is* a plot on King Michael's life."

"Rubbish!" Grazu turned to Slava. "Do you have the background information on the meeting? We found nothing in Vincenti's compartment."

She nodded, brushing the hair back from her eyes. "I have it in

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my briefcase." She produced a sheaf of papers from the fine leather case Michael had noticed earlier. "Here's everything we need if you wish to continue."

"I think we should vote on it," Aman said. "I vote we abort the mission and return home. We can leave the train at Milan and catch the next one back to Romania."

"I vote we continue on," Grazu urged. He and Aman looked to Slava and Michael for their decisions.

"Continue," Slava said.

"Continue," Michael agreed.

"Three to one on my side," Grazu crowed. "Will you leave or continue with us, Aman?"

The museum director stared at him with ill-concealed distaste. "I will continue, if only to keep you under some sort of control, little man. It is not yet the Germans' time to rule."

Grazu was on his feet, bristling. "I am Romanian, not German! Are you questioning my loyalty?"

At that moment there was a knock on the compartment door. Michael opened it and the conductor stepped partway in. "The authorities in Milan have been alerted. They will meet the train and remove the body there. Everyone will be questioned before we are allowed to proceed. It may take longer than our scheduled one-hour stop."

When he'd left them alone again, Slava said, "They'll want to know where each of us was. We'd better get our stories straight."

"Michael and I were together in the dining car," Aman pointed out. "Neither of us had an opportunity to stab him."

Grazu missed no opportunity to continue his feud with the older man. "That's only if we believe Vincenti was alive when you left his compartment. We heard you speak to him, but we heard no answer and none of us saw him. You told us he didn't want to be disturbed, but that might have been because he was already dead."

"He was alive when I left him," Aman stated firmly. "But either you or Miss Botosana might have entered the compartment and killed him while Michael and I were in the dining car."

Slava smiled at Michael. "It seems that you are the only one with an alibi."

"Not so fast," Grazu said. "Perhaps Vincenti was still alive when the Gypsy went to check on him. A dagger is a Gypsy weapon, remember. He might have stabbed him and then come running to report his murder."

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Slava sighed and nodded. "It appears that any one of us might have done it."

The railroad station at Milan was modeled like a cathedral, with high vaulted ceilings and balconies that seemed to serve no purpose. Michael remembered it from his previous visit to the city, but this time the experience was different. He was led through the station to a private office the police had commandeered for questioning. The others had gone first, but he'd been kept separate from them until he was questioned.

Lieutenant Rizzoli was a beefy man who smoked a cigar. That he disliked Gypsies was obvious to Michael with the first words out of his mouth.

"Is this one of your Gypsy shivs?" he asked, gesturing toward the dagger in a plastic evidence bag that rested on the table between them. He said "shiv" in English, though he spoke in Italian. Michael wondered if he knew that the slang word came originally from the Romany word for blade. He didn't really need to know, because to him Gypsies and knives were practically the same.

"I never saw that dagger before," Michael answered truthfully. "It's not a Gypsy weapon."

Rizzoli chewed on his cigar. "Tell us in your own words exactly what you know of this. I believe you were the one who found the body."

"I found it," Michael admitted, and launched into a brief account of their journey. He didn't know how much the others had told, but he managed to remain vague about the nature of their journey to Switzerland.

When he'd finished, the police stenographer typed up the statement while he waited on a bench outside the office to sign it. As he sat there, Grazu, the labor leader, was brought out of an adjoining office and seated next to him.

Seeing Michael, Grazu seemed to have forgotten his suspicions concerning the dagger. "This is all a matter of routine," he offered, smiling nervously. "The detective assured me we're not under suspicion. They're questioning the other passengers about a possible thief, someone Vincenti might have surprised in his compartment."

"He surprised no one," Michael reminded him. "He was drafting his remarks to the king when he was stabbed. If a thief had entered, thinking the compartment was empty, he would simply have excused himself and left."

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Lieutenant Rizzoli reappeared with two typed statements. Grazu read his, then took out a fountain pen and signed it. He passed the pen to Michael for the signing of his statement. "Fine," the lieutenant told them. "You are free to reboard the train. It should be getting under way shortly."

Vincenti's body had been removed in their absence, as had his overnight bag and topcoat. The compartment was empty. Michael lingered near the door at the front of the passenger car, watching for Slava and Aman to return from questioning.

That was how he happened to see Captain Segar suddenly dart across the high-ceilinged station and grab an innocent-looking man in a bear hug. The man carried a package about the size of a cigar box.

Michael thought for a moment that his eyes were deceiving him. Segar in Milan? It was impossible—Segar was back in Romania!

But when he hurried over to the struggling pair to confirm the identity, Segar spoke to him. "Michael, take that package out of his hand—very carefully, or you might blow us all up."

"Segar, what—"

"Take the package!"

The man in Segar's grasp, with a black moustache and glowering eyes, struggled to break free, then dropped the package. Michael made a grab for it, but wasn't quite fast enough.

The package hit the floor but nothing happened.

By that time, Lieutenant Rizzoli and two uniformed officers had come running.

"What's going on here?" Rizzoli demanded.

"Hold this man!" Segar commanded in the most authoritative voice Michael had ever heard him use. "Here are my credentials. I represent the new Romanian government. This man was attempting to board the train with an explosive device."

"Vincenti has been killed," Michael managed to tell Segar.

"His death may be linked to this bomb plot in some way," Segar speculated. "I followed this man here from Romania."

Rizzoli chewed on his cigar and carefully picked up the fallen package. In a gesture either brave or foolhardy, he carefully tore open a part of the wrapping. "It's a book," he announced. "*Twentieth Century Romania.*"

"A gift fit for a king," Segar said. "Let us go somewhere private, where innocent travelers will not be injured if it goes off . . ."

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The Italian lieutenant led them back to an office used for questioning. The prisoner had been handcuffed and seated himself silently in one of the chairs. Michael tried to remember if he'd ever seen him before, but decided it was only the expression that was familiar—the arrogant sneer he'd seen on officials of the old government when he drove to the city. He'd thought these men, and that expression, were gone from Romania for good. But the time had been too short. The new freedom could not come overnight.

Segar removed the jacket from the book and took a penknife from his pocket. He slit the binding, front and back, and peeled away the cloth covering. Something white and doughy came into view. "Plastic explosive," he told them. "There's a timer and detonator hidden in the binding, but I won't fool with those." He placed it on the desk. "I'm sure it's safe until the time is set. Otherwise he wouldn't have been carrying it around like this."

Lieutenant Rizzoli stared at the prisoner. "Who is he?"

"A member of the secret police under the former government. His name is Meershan, though he goes by others. He took a plane from Bucharest this morning. We had a tip about the bomb, so I went along to see what he was doing with it. It was packed in his luggage and plastic explosives are difficult to detect with airport X-rays. When he left the plane at Milan, I decided he would make contact with this train."

"To kill the members of the government mission?" Michael asked.

"No, to deliver this infernal device into the hands of the final assassin, who would present it to King Michael. My plan was to follow him until he made contact with one of your party, but in the station he spotted me—he must have remembered seeing me on the plane. He started running with his package. I couldn't risk his getting away with the bomb—I had to arrest him."

"You have no jurisdiction here," Rizzoli muttered.

"It was a citizen's arrest until you arrived to make it official," Segar explained. He turned to Michael. "Tell me about Vincenti's murder."

Running through the events quickly, Michael concluded, "It seems likely that Vincenti somehow discovered the identity of the would-be assassin. He had to be killed before the assassin was to accept delivery of the bomb from this man Meershan."

Rizzoli lit a fresh cigar and walked over to grasp their prisoner by the coat lapels. "Who were you meeting on the train?" he asked.

"No one."

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The detective leaned closer, until the glowing tip of his cigar was almost brushing Meershan's cheek. "I'll ask again. To whom were you supposed to deliver this package?"

Meershan's glowering eyes went to each of their faces in turn, finally stopping at Michael. "Him!" he spat out. "The Gypsy!"

Before Rizzoli could say anything, Captain Segar spoke up in Michael's defense. "That's not true. I recommended Michael for this mission personally. King Michael would be the last person he'd attempt to kill."

Rizzoli relaxed a bit. "Why should anyone want to kill a deposed king who's been living in exile for more than forty years? Surely your country would never take him back."

"It has to do with symbols," Michael told him. "The king is a symbol of the old Romania, before Communism. We may not want him back, but we want that sort of life back—a freedom even I was too young to have ever known. Though our former President and his wife went before a firing squad, there are still plenty of people opposed to a freedom of that sort."

The lieutenant turned back to the prisoner. "Do you have a better answer for me, scum? Who were you planning to meet?"

Meershan's eyes grew even harder. "Go to hell!"

Rizzoli raised his arm to strike the man, but Michael intervened. "Wait a minute! Give me time to think."

"You are going to produce the murderer from a hat, perhaps?"

"I know I'm not guilty, despite what this man says. And we can rule out robbery as a motive. Since the bomb had to have been intended for use by one of those three—Slava, Grazu, or Aman—we can safely assume one of them killed Dr. Vincenti. Otherwise we have a would-be bomber assassin plus a totally independent murderer without logical motive."

"You said Vincenti was preparing a draft of his greeting to the king," Segar reminded him. "Could he have left a hidden message in it, identifying his killer?"

Michael shook his head. "Not unless it was so obscure as to be useless. It was his handwriting, but there were only general remarks about the greatness of Romania's past."

"Perhaps all three are in on it," Rizzoli suggested. "I read a mystery once where all the passengers on a train conspired to kill—"

Then it came to Michael. He remembered something, and it all came to him. "Not all three," he said. "Just one of them. And now I know which one . . ."

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The other three were brought from the train, and the passengers told there would be another brief delay before the journey to Lausanne and Paris continued. Segar suggested that Michael explain his reasoning to him, and Lieutenant Rizzoli stood by. The prisoner Meershan was being held in an adjoining room.

"You'll remember," Michael began, facing Slava Botosana and the two men, "that I searched the compartment very carefully after I discovered Dr. Vincenti's body. Something was missing and I couldn't understand what—not at first. Then we got on to looking for his passport and other things and I forgot about it."

"What was missing?" Grazu asked.

"Dr. Vincenti had written a pencil draft of the remarks he would make in greeting King Michael, yet there was no pencil in the room. It wasn't on the desktop with the sheets of paper, or on the floor, or down the seat cushions. All I found in his pockets was a pen. You'll remember I even searched his overnight bag on the rack. There was no pencil anywhere."

"No pencil," Rizzoli repeated. "Are you saying the man was killed over a pencil?"

"Not at all. I'm just saying it wasn't there. Why not? There is only one possible explanation. The murderer removed it from the compartment after stabbing Vincenti."

"I repeat, are you saying the man was killed over a pencil?"

"No. If he was killed *over* a pencil, why would the killer remove it? A pencil is a pencil. What harm could there be in leaving it? The pencil had to belong to the killer. Not only that, the pencil had to be readily identifiable with the killer. In other words, the pencil—if left at the crime scene—would have revealed the killer's identity."

"It had the name of a restaurant on it?" Aman suggested. "Or a business establishment?"

Michael shook his head. "An ordinary wooden pencil, even with advertising on it, would not immediately identify the killer. I believe it was something more—the gold mechanical pencil I noticed Slava using back in Bucharest." He turned toward her. "Perhaps it even has your initials engraved on it, Slava."

She was on her feet, face flushed, struggling for breath. "I'm not the only one who owns a pencil! What about these two?"

Michael shook his head. "Aman uses a felt-tip pen, and I just borrowed Grazu's fountain pen a short while ago. You're the only one with a recognizable pencil, Slava. You went in to discuss the greeting to King Michael and loaned Vincenti your pencil while he

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wrote a rough draft. Then what happened? Somehow he must have suspected you, and you stabbed him. You had to remove the pencil, or it would have placed you in the room. He wouldn't have just borrowed it from you, because he had his own pen."

"You're very clever," she said, turning on her heel and heading for the door. "Or at least you think you are."

They all saw what she was doing, but nobody spoke. Instead of the door to the terminal, she opened the door to the adjoining office where the handcuffed Meershan was waiting with an officer. "Slava!" he exclaimed when he saw her. "What—?"

She slammed the door on him and turned, her face drained of color.

"Why did you kill Dr. Vincenti?" Michael asked.

Her shoulders sagged in defeat. "He told me while he wrote his remarks with my pencil. He said some of my past associations had been questioned by the new government, and after reviewing the matter he'd decided I was not to be allowed to meet with King Michael—I was to remain at the hotel while the rest of you spoke with him. I had no choice then. Meershan was on his way to meet me with the bomb. I knew that killing Dr. Vincenti might abort the entire mission, but I had to gamble that the rest of you would decide to continue. The dagger was in a hidden pocket of my briefcase."

"Did you get all that?" Rizzoli asked the stenographer. Then, to Slava he said, "You are under arrest. You may have a lawyer present if you wish."

Michael and the others remained overnight in Milan. In the morning they continued on to Lausanne.

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a *NEW* short story by

JAMES POWELL

"Then Morse code is really—"

"A cipher," nodded Lyda. "Oh, you're quick, Dr. Hill."

Have you ever wondered at the speed with which semaphore can be sent? Wait till you meet James Powell's amazing Peaches Mimosa. In Jeffry Scott's story "Jojo and the Forged Will" earlier in this issue, Jojo Lorraine tells her friend Mandy, "Giving you moral guidance is like teaching algebra to a poodle." Well, Jojo's been around, but it's obvious she's *never met Peaches . . .*

THE CODE OF THE POODLES

by JAMES POWELL

Small or not, Aunt Flora's living room was a cozy place, with its bright oriental rug, pewter-colored woodwork, and decorative plates commemorating the Royal visit to Canada in 1939. But Toby was sure Aunt Flora would never have kept the room this hot. Only a moment ago he'd been wiping the last of the snowstorm from his eyebrows. Now he felt so drowsy from the heat he almost dropped his drink.

"Of course it really wouldn't be a code. It'd be a cipher," admitted Lyda Belgrave, screwing the top back on the bottle of rye and smiling seductively at Dr. Hill across the coffee table.

The doctor beamed and wiggled his pear shape forward in the chair as though the large, coarse-faced woman were a comfortable fire. "I've never been able to keep those two straight," he admitted.

"Then here's a little trick for remembering," she said. "If you give a number or a symbol to every word in the dictionary you've made yourself a code. Give one to every letter in the alphabet and you've got a cipher."

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"Then Morse code is really—"

"A cipher," nodded Lyda. "Oh, you're quick, Dr. Hill. How nice of Toby to bring you by. It's tedious sometimes being pent up all day with a dog. Not that I'm complaining. Believe me, Peaches Mimosa's a real joy." She aimed a nod and a stiff little smile in the direction of the miniature apricot poodle who watched them with intense black eyes, her muzzle of tight curls down snug on the upholstered arm of the wingchair.

"Sounds like all you need is company," smiled the doctor.

Toby raised an eyebrow. This wasn't the way they'd planned things. Clearly, Dr. Hill had his own agenda.

When Toby's Aunt Flora died last year, she left everything in a trust fund for the care of her beloved Peaches and named her housekeeper Lyda Belgrave as the dog's guardian. Toby considered contesting the will on the grounds of mental incompetence, for toward the end of her life his aunt, convinced the dog was trying to communicate with her, had spent much time and effort trying to break the code of the poodles. But his lawyer advised against this. After all, poodles don't live forever, and as the will stood Toby would eventually inherit everything.

A patient, unenergetic young man, Toby might well have taken this advice. But he didn't like Lyda Belgrave. So when he learned that she had taken up his aunt's work in poodle communication, it occurred to him that that might just make her crazy enough to be declared an unfit guardian for the dog. Toby was rather sure the man at the bank who was executor of the estate would agree to have him named to replace her. Then Toby could move out of his pricy little apartment and into the house that would one day be his. As for Peaches, he bore the dog no ill will. May she live forever.

Still, Toby might not have acted on this thought if one slow, rainy afternoon Dr. Owen Hill hadn't come into the curio shop and attempted to sell him an ornate inkstand made from a horse's hoof, claiming it had been given to his great-grandfather by the Marquis of Lorne when he was Governor General of Canada. Dr. Hill insisted the hoof was from Lord Clyde's charger at Balaklava. Toby had heard similar claims made of several such inkwells. In fact, his Uncle George, Aunt Flora's late husband, insisted that Lord Clyde's charger must have been more centipede than horse or else one of those fabulous creatures like the five-legged chicken found only in the poultry-parts section of the supermarket.

In the end, Toby declined the inkstand. But when he learned that

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Dr. Hill was a psychiatrist quite recently moved to town from Halifax, his interest had quickened, for the man carried a whiff of the shady about him which suggested that for a consideration he might tailor a diagnosis of Lyda Belgrave to fit Toby's needs. That had been the real purpose of their visit here. If he now found the doctor untrustworthy, Toby knew he had no one to blame but himself.

"Let me get this straight," said Dr. Hill. "Your friend Flora thought her poodle was trying to communicate with her using Morse code?"

Lyda nodded. "See, there's Peaches with her paws and nose on the arm of the chair. Right now it's paw-nose-paw. Flora said let's call that dit-dah-dit. The letter 'F'. And so forth and so on with every combination, including no nose or no paws showing at all."

Dr. Hill had been counting with his thumbs on his fingertips. "But," he objected, "two dits and a dah won't go far. I mean, unless I've lost everything from my scoutmaster days wouldn't that limit the poor creature to only eight letters of the Morse alphabet?"

Lyda was jubilant. "Great minds think alike! That's just what I told Flora. Me, I've always favored the ear semaphore or wigwag." She slapped her hands together suddenly. Toby, who was starting to nod again, almost lost his drink a second time. The poodle's fat curly ears perked up. "There, you see!" she said. "The creature could wigwag us a message if she wanted. But she won't. Why? Spite. Orneriness. Who knows?"

"Maybe the cat's got her tongue," suggested Dr. Hill.

Lyda uttered a throaty laugh, reached over, and slapped his knee. Then she said, "The Boy Scouts, was that how you met our poor sleepy, sleepy friend?" She crooned "sleepy" as if to nudge Toby over the edge into slumber. But Toby resisted, struggling to focus his eyes.

"Hardly," said Dr. Hill and, embroidering on the lie he and Toby had worked out between them, he said, "No, we've a mutual friend in the curio game. I'm new in town. You know, camped out at a hotel with most of my things in storage. Toby's helping me apartment-hunt. When we found ourselves in the neighborhood, he said, 'Hello, I know someone around here you'd enjoy meeting.' So here I am. What a charming place."

The woman made a thoughtful noise and stared for a moment at the window and the slant of the blowing snow. Then she said, "What a pity. I mean, here I am a lonely lady with rooms and rooms to

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spare. And there you are a sociable professional gentleman looking for a—"

At this point, Toby, who could tell where things were heading, gave up the fight and drifted off to sleep.

In the first of his pleasant dreams, he saw himself bursting in on them in sweaty *flagrante delicto* waving a court order revoking Lyda Belgrave's guardianship on the grounds of moral turpitude. In the second, he was Gustave Dore's angel, with a flaming sword, driving a jaded and middle-aged Adam and Eve wrapped in bedsheets through the gates of Paradise and out into the weather.

Toby slept long enough to awake refreshed. But before he could open his eyes he heard Lyda say, "Come on, then. Let's let Toby sleep. I'll show you the rooms."

"Lead on," said Dr. Hill.

While Toby watched through half closed lids, Lyda used the neck of the bottle of rye to help herself get to her feet. Then, keeping her grip on the bottle, she headed toward the staircase with the doctor in her wake.

Sitting there alone, it suddenly came to Toby why his Aunt Flora hadn't made him the poodle's guardian in the first place. He'd bet money it was the gerbil-in-the-blender business when he was ten. He shuddered, remembering. How could he have been so cruel? As if to make amends, he looked over at Peaches. "Good girl," he said. "Good girl." But when he turned away and reached for his watery drink, the dog raised her head and shook it until her ears cracked like battleflags in a windstorm. As if this was a signal, Rusty, Lyda Belgrave's rutabaga-colored cat, jumped down from the windowsill and hurried out of the room and up the stairs.

Peaches returned Toby's gaze for a moment before carefully setting her muzzle back down on the upholstery with both paws arranged on the right side. Dit-dit-dah? "U?" wondered Toby out loud. The dog raised her muzzle and winked her left eye. Slowly and deliberately, she repeated that same combination of paws, nose, and wink.

Fascinated, sure the animal was trying to tell him something, Toby put down his drink, sat up straight, and watched. Now the poodle winked her right eye—paw-paw-wink-nose—while simultaneously raising her ears, making them into a lazy V.

Suddenly Toby had it. "V!" he said. "Dit-dit-dit-dah! A right-eyed wink equals a dit. That makes a left-eyed one a dah."

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Good boy, Toby boy, signaled Peaches with paws, winks, and nose. Now was that really so hard? Before the astonished young man could answer, the dog continued: It took poor Flora forever to figure it out, only to have the shock of what I told her snuff out her life. I miss old Flora. Her baby talk was a bit much, but she was a damn fine tummy-rubber. She— Somewhere in a block to the west a dog barked urgently. Peaches cocked her ears and repeated the bark. She didn't turn back to Toby until she heard her bark echoed to the east. Sorry about the interruption, Toby boy, she signaled, but it's seven years' bad luck to break the chain on the dog telegraph. By the way, if you're in southeastern Chile over the weekend, stay out of the mountain valleys. Moderate earthquakes may cause landslides in low-lying areas.

Distant laughter came from upstairs. Peaches glanced at the ceiling and said, Toby boy, I've gone to a lot of trouble to communicate with Flora and now with you. Why? I'll tell you why. So the dead can be avenged. You see, I saw Belgrave kill your Uncle George. I was there in the room when she put the poison in his glass.

"You what?" demanded Toby. Then he lowered his voice and, looking toward the stairs, whispered, "You saw her murder Uncle George?"

Correct, said Peaches. But you don't have to whisper. Rusty's my lookout. We've struck a deal. The dog shuddered. Believe me, I pondered it long and hard before going in with a cat on anything. Their minds are so damn devious and their appetites so hideously perverse. I mean, how can you figure an animal that has to sit down every time it scratches its ear? But I knew I'd need an accomplice to be lookout and stuff like that. If Belgrave suspected we were talking, I'd be in real deep trouble. She knows I saw what she did. I'm taking the risk because, well, I knew you'd want to kill her and avenge your uncle's death.

"But why would she murder Uncle George?" demanded Toby.

Belgrave couldn't handle him the way she could Flora, replied the poodle. She knew George wanted to get rid of her. So she killed him. With George out of the way, she'd have Flora for a meal ticket for a long, long time.

Peaches stopped and waited for Toby to say something.

But Toby didn't know what to say. He didn't like Lyda Belgrave, but he wasn't going to kill her. He wasn't going to kill anyone.

Speak, Toby boy, speak, signaled Peaches. When he didn't, she added, Look, we can work out a real slick way to pull it off. No one'll

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have to know. Except Rusty, of course. That's the price of his cooperation. You see, cats have this real weakness for human eyeballs. Fresh kill, of course. So he'll have to be there.

Toby swallowed hard and in a horrified, unsteady voice said, "I guess we better let the police handle this. Yes, that's the best way to go."

Peaches threw up her paws in disgust and looked away. Then she thumped her chin back down on the arm of the chair and signaled, You humans have a large helping of the hyena in you, the way you expect others to do your killing. The dog's black eyes flashed. For God's sake, let's see some outrage! Let's see some moral indignation! Doesn't blood and honor mean anything any more? Your Uncle George loved you. He taught you the curio business.

"He was a fine, generous, loving man," agreed Toby.

Well, his murderer is going to walk, as they say on television, signaled Peaches. The police'll never pin anything on her at this late date. Toby boy, you can't let her get away with it. You've got to kill her. Hell, I gave it a shot that same night. I tried tripping her up at the top of the stairs when she was drunk from celebrating the dirty deed. But rage made me sloppy. I bungled the job. She's been on her guard ever since. With Flora dead, she mostly keeps me locked down cellar in the dark with no one to talk to but the rats.

"Okay, look—wouldn't that be enough, getting Lyda kicked out of here for mistreating you?" asked Toby.

Matters have gone too far, said Peaches. She's made me feel the toe of her boot too many times. Listen, I'll be up front with you. It's really *me* I want you to avenge, okay? So let me sweeten the pot a little. Kill Belgrave and I'll teach you how to predict earthquakes, like the one they're going to have in Chile over the weekend. Sure, there's a trick to it. But it's so simple you'll kick yourself you didn't catch on. You could turn a nice buck predicting earthquakes.

"I'm not going to kill anybody," insisted Toby.

In a flurry of signals, Peaches said, For God's sake, is that it? Are you just going to roll over and play dead? She stopped and gave him a long, calculating stare. Then her black lips curled with contempt. Ah, so that's it. So that's your dirty game. You just sit back and everything falls into your lap—the house, the money, the curio shop. And you won't have to wait very long, right? Cute little Peaches Mimosa won't last long once Rusty's done with her for welshing on

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the deal. Bad Toby. Bad Toby. God, and I thought cats were disgusting creatures to deal with!

"I'm sorry if this puts you in wrong with Rusty," said Toby. "I—"

Peaches silenced him with a look. Kill Belgrave, she commanded. Avenge me. Avenge your uncle.

"Maybe you should just forget about revenge," said Toby. "Forgive and forget. Don't animals believe in forgiveness?"

Peaches' mind was elsewhere. Hardly, she signaled absently. We'd never have gotten as far as we have if we did. Her eyes looked tired and worried now. All right, all right. Tell you what. She licked her lips. Do it. Kill Belgrave and I'll teach you the earthquake bit *and* rat.

Toby had to laugh. "Rat? Why would I want to learn rat?"

Rats have the cure for cancer, Peaches informed him. We were chewing the fat down cellar and the subject just happened to come up. They told me they've got the cure. And rats don't lie. A guy fluent in rat might be able to coax it out of them. I'm not saying it'd be easy. Rats are real haughty, stuffed-shirt types. Men might have to—you know—crawl a little.

"To rats?"

Peaches nodded earnestly. You've got it. I see something like Secretary Week, only bigger. Maybe Rat Month. A Take-a-Rat-to-Lunch kind of thing. I see Disney filming *A Rat Named Cuddles*. Every creature likes to be loved and esteemed. Win over the rats and you'd be a hero to your kind and gender. "There goes good old Toby boy," they'll say, "who warns us before earthquakes and stamped out cancer!" What do you say, Toby boy? Is it a deal?

Here Rusty hurried into the room and returned to his place on the windowsill. Toby had only enough time to answer the poodle's pleading look with a small firm shake of the head when Lyda and Dr. Hill came into the living room, supporting each other arm and arm and clumsy with drink.

"The good doctor says the accommodations are to his liking," announced Lyda.

"*Everything's* to my liking," smirked Dr. Hill.

Lyda smiled. "He could move in tomorrow, if you'd lend a hand, there's a good Toby."

Early the next afternoon, a small rental van pulled up in front of the only shoveled parking place on the block. Shaking his head at

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human naivete, Dr. Hill got from behind the wheel, took the kitchen chair left there to claim the place, and tossed it into a snowdrift.

While parking the van, he suggested that Toby consider him a spy in the enemy camp. Toby pretended to go along with that. But he was done with Dr. Hill and Lyda Belgrave. He wasn't going to kill her, that was for sure. And Peaches was right—the police wouldn't be able to prove she'd murdered Uncle George. And Peaches was right about something else. Toby knew he'd do nothing. He'd just wait. And when the time came, he would come into his inheritance.

Later, when everything had been carried upstairs, Dr. Hill bragged of his special spaghetti sauce and offered to cook them dinner. Toby declined the invitation but volunteered to watch Peaches until they got back from grocery shopping. He'd thought things over during the night. He wanted to speak to the poodle again and offer what help he could on the matter of Rusty, making it clear he meant anything short of harming the animal.

When the shoppers left, laughing like children on an outing, Toby went into the living room, but Peaches wasn't there. It suddenly occurred to him that he hadn't seen the dog at all during the moving-in process. He went to the cellar door and called down into the darkness.

Nothing. With growing alarm, he went out into the first-floor hallway, where he came face to face with Rusty. He had never realized until that moment how sinister in every way cats were. Rusty promptly turned around and, with a beckoning look over the shoulder, the animal led him up to the door of Uncle George's old second-floor study and left him there. Toby pushed the door open tentatively, not sure what horrible thing he was going to find.

Peaches was waiting for him, her chin on the arm of the black-leather sofa. Thanks for coming, she signaled, seeming in much better spirits than at the end of their last meeting.

Toby said, "I've been looking all over for you. I was afraid something had happened. I just want to say that if there's anything I can do to help you out of this fix with Rusty—"

Thanks, I appreciate that, said Peaches, but that'll all be taken care of. There's more than one way to skin a cat. No problem.

Toby felt very relieved. "I'm glad," he said.

Peaches nodded her appreciation. Then she signaled. The reason I sent the cat to get you is because I misspoke yesterday. We poodles value truth, so I'd like to set the record straight. Remember when I told you animals don't believe in forgiveness? Well, I'd forgotten

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gerbils. Gerbils always forgive. Maybe that's why they make such easy victims. I just thought you'd like to know.

"I do," beamed Toby. "I really do."

Glad to be of help, said Peaches. Don't close the door on your way out.

Toby went back into the hall with a light step. Peaches' words had lifted a heavy burden from his heart. Gerbils forgave! Toby was still smiling when he took his first step down the staircase and suddenly found the poodle underfoot.

Dr. Hill dumped the bag of groceries on the hall table and rushed to the foot of the stairs where Toby's body lay, the head cocked oddly, the face veiled with blood. "Call an ambulance!" he said, and while Lyda ran for the telephone in the living room he knelt down beside the body and, cursing, felt for a pulse. "Forget the ambulance," he said. Then he sucked in his breath and moaned, "His eyes! What's happened to his eyes?"

Lyda hadn't gotten farther than the living-room doorway. "Owen," she whispered hoarsely, "come here. Come and see what the cat's got."

EDITOR'S NOTE: When we told James Powell we thought many readers would find the business about the eyeballs bizarre, he sent us a page from William Butler Yeats' *The Trembling of the Veil* (1922), in which he tells of Oscar Wilde's parents: "They were famous people and there are many stories; and even a horrible folk story, the invention of some Connaught peasant, that tells how Sir William Wilde took out the eyes of some men, who had come to consult him as an oculist, and laid them on a plate, intending to replace them in a moment, and how the eyes were eaten by a cat. As a certain friend of mine, who has made a prolonged study of the nature of cats, said when he first heard the tale, 'Cats love eyes.' "

"Q"

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a distinguished reprint by

REGINALD HILL

At twelve noon there were three people in the house. By the time the clock struck one, two of them would be dead and the life of the third would have changed forever . . .

CROWDED HOUR

by REGINALD HILL

When the front doorbell rang, Daphne was sitting curled up on the sofa reading *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. She tried to pretend she hadn't heard it. Frank and Cora had just started to make love by the body of Cora's murdered husband. It was a bad place for an interruption.

The bell rang again. With a sigh of irritation, she rose and went to answer it. As she passed down the hall, she heard the church clock beginning to scatter all the quarters.

There was a man standing on the step, rather too close to the door. He was in his mid-thirties, tall, narrow-faced, with a good tan which showed off strong white teeth as he smiled and said, "Mrs. Davis?"

"Yes."

"Is your husband in?"

He wasn't. Daphne was opening her mouth to say so when the shadow of the Golden Showers growing up the pseudo-Græcian column of the mini-portico moved. There was no wind. Someone was standing there out of sight.

It was probably all perfectly innocent but she had been sensitized by her reading and she heard herself saying, "Yes. I'll just go and fetch him. Please wait."

She began to close the door. He continued to smile but his foot was already over the threshold. She tried to slam the door and had

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the brief satisfaction of hearing him gasp as his expensive soft leather slip-on was crushed against the jamb. Then the hidden man appeared and flung his weight against the door. It burst open. She turned to flee. They caught her in two strides. She hit the floor heavily. The second man knelt astride her, his knees gripping her as tight as a lover's. From inside his loose-fitting blouson he dragged a shotgun, barrels and stock sawn off to reduce it to little more than eighteen inches. He pushed it hard under her chin and hissed, "Keep quiet!"

She heard footsteps moving swiftly, doors opening and shutting. She glimpsed the first man passing on his way to the staircase. He carried an automatic pistol and he was no longer smiling.

Time passed; terror stretched it to an eternity. Then she saw him again, a tapering giant from her angle of view. He was pushing his gun back into an underarm holster.

"All right. Let her up," he commanded.

The man astride her squeezed once more with his legs and rose reluctantly. The tall man offered his hand. She ignored it and rolled away from them both.

And as she pushed herself upright, she heard the church clock complete its long recitation of the hour.

In the lounge, they prodded her into a chair. The man with the shotgun glowered down at her while the other went to the drinks cabinet, poured a tumblerful of Scotch, and brought it to her.

"Get that inside you," he said.

"I could do with one of them," said the other. He was much younger, stockier of build, coarser of feature.

"No way," said the tall man. "Come on, Mrs. Davis, drink it up, then we'll have a little chat."

Slowly Daphne drank. She hated whisky. Worse than medicine, she used to say. For some reason this seemed to exasperate Ted, so she stopped saying it. But now it *was* medicine and she needed it. Her whole body felt slack and weak. She was seeing this familiar room through a soft filter. Only the intruders came out sharp and focused.

"He keeps nothing here," she said. "It's all in the shop. You're wasting your time."

She hadn't meant to speak, but her voice was only as lightly in her control as her muscles. Words were jostling to get out. It wasn't

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contact she wanted but a barrier. There seemed to be some measure of safety in words.

The tall man said, "Thank you, Mrs. Davis, but we realize that. Just you concentrate on answering a couple of questions and everything will be all right. Where's he gone?"

It was Ted they wanted. Ted and the shop keys. Her mind was racing like a squirrel in a wheel, the words were crowding her lips once more.

"He's gone out. He's lunching out. Business. He often has Sunday business lunches. He won't be back till this evening. He's bringing some people back for dinner. Business friends. All men. Half a dozen of them. They'll all be arriving together—"

The words felt as if they would come forever. She was amazed at her quickness of wit. Ted would be amazed, too, Ted who was always putting her down for being slow.

Suddenly her hair was seized from behind and she shrieked as her head was jerked viciously to one side. She'd been concentrating all her attention on the tall man and hadn't noticed the stocky man's movements.

"Shall I knock the stupid cow about a bit?" he asked.

"Not yet," said the other. "She's only trying to be clever. That's a good sign. Shows she's got her wits about her. I can't bear hysterical women, Mrs. Davis. So Ted's gone to lunch? Thing is, we've been watching the house for half an hour, ever since he finished washing the car. We'd have come in then, only your neighbor was deadheading his roses and it's silly to take unnecessary chances, isn't it? But we know the car's still in the garage and your husband hasn't come out of the front of the house. So where is he?"

Daphne didn't speak. Her head was forced further sideways till she was almost looking at the tall man upside down. He sat down on the sofa facing her. He noticed the open book lying there, picked it up, looked at the cover, read a little, smiled.

"Okay, Tommy," he said. "Give her one. But take it easy. Just break her nose."

Somehow that *take it easy* was even more terrifying than the shotgun swinging up over her face. "He's taken Lady for a walk!" she screamed. "Our dog. Lady. He's taken her for a walk."

The shotgun stopped at the peak of its swing.

"Dog? No one said nothing to me about a dog," said the man called Tommy.

"Tommy, I try to keep demands on your mentals to a minimum.

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No sweat. It's not a Doberman, just a nice old friendly Labrador. Right, Mrs. Davis?"

The tall man's detailed knowledge was disturbing, but the bit of her mind still in touch with thought observed that he himself had been disturbed. This was an upset to his plans and he didn't look like a man who liked upsets.

He rose from the sofa and went to the window overlooking the rear garden: patio and barbecue area, long lawn, small orchard, bounded by a briar hedge with open fields beyond.

"He went this way?"

"Yes. There's a gate in the hedge."

"Then?"

"There's a path. Lots of paths. You can get down to the river. Or across to the golf course. Or through the woods to Little Morton. Please, can you make him let me go?"

He made a gesture and Tommy gave her hair a last vicious twist before releasing her.

"What now, Mac?" he said surlily. "This ain't so bleeding clever, is it?"

He spoke with an indeterminate London accent. The tall man's voice had seemed flat and featureless till the name of Mac drew attention to a faint under-burr.

"No sweat," said Mac. "He'll be back for his lunch. We just sit in comfort and wait."

He returned to the sofa. He looked very relaxed in his dark-blue lightweight jacket, open-necked grey-silk shirt, and knife-edged light-blue slacks. The outfit looked continental in style and very expensive. Tommy by contrast was straight off a chain-store counter. Beneath the loose cotton blouson, he wore a hooped T-shirt which strained over his barrel chest. Daphne tried to register every detail. She didn't want to seem stupid when the police or Ted were asking her questions. Also it was important to make herself believe in a time after this.

Tommy wandered across to the drinks cabinet.

"Come on, Mac," he said. "What about a drink? Little one won't do no harm."

"Are you deaf or just stupid? I told you, no alcohol. You can get pissed out of your mind on your duty-frees later on. But I wouldn't say no to a coffee. Why don't you make us a cup of coffee, Mrs. Davis?"

She wanted to say no, but she wasn't brave enough. In any case,

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simple acts of defiance led nowhere. She had to think and it was terror that made you clever, not courage.

"All right," she said, rising.

The door from the kitchen into the garden was open. Ted had gone that way and she hadn't locked it after him. There were bound to be people outside on a sunny Sunday. And even though the houses were some distance apart and well screened, her screams could not go unheard.

She didn't want to appear to be hurrying, but in fact her legs proved to be so unsteady that she didn't have to pretend. She went out of the lounge, down the hall, into the kitchen. There was no sound of anyone coming after her; she was holding her breath as she moved to the sink and gazed out on freedom. Now she dared a look behind her.

No one. She might not have to scream. A thirty-yard dash and she could be into the garden next door, where there seemed to be a large and noisy party every sunny Sunday. She'd asked Ted to complain. He hadn't, of course. But now she would greet the revellers like dear friends and never be able to hear them again without thanksgiving.

She went to the door and pressed the handle and pulled. Nothing happened. She pulled harder. Still nothing. And knowing now it was all pointless, she pulled again and again, sobbing with effort and frustration. "I just wanted to say, instant will do," said the man called Mac. He was standing in the doorway from the hall. In his upraised hand was the back-door key.

"First rule: plug all boltholes," he said. "Two spoons of sugar for Tommy. You've probably noticed, his metabolism's on fast burn."

She thought she'd trained herself not to cry any more, but now the tears streamed uncheckably as she filled the electric kettle. By the time it had boiled, the tears had stopped. She stared out of the window again. There was still no sign of Ted and Lady coming over the fields.

She didn't know whether to be glad or sorry.

As she carried the tray of coffee cups into the lounge, she heard the church clock strike the first quarter.

They drank the coffee in silence. Tommy was still sulking at being forbidden a real drink, but silent inactivity was clearly not something that came easy.

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"Look," he said, "what if he hasn't got his keys with him? They could just be lying around the house somewhere, couldn't they?"

Mac clapped twice. "Great thinking, Tommy," he said. "Except that he won't take those keys off, no matter what he's doing, am I right, Mrs. Davis? But it's not important, anyway. It's him I need as much as his keys. A stranger can't just walk into a jeweler's shop on a Sunday, even if he knew where all the alarms were, which I don't. Too many eyes, too many mouths. They see Mr. Davis taking a special customer in, that's okay, that's normal. Anyone else and it's 999, hello hello hello, in five minutes flat."

"Yeah, all right," conceded Tommy reluctantly.

"I'm glad I meet with your approval, Tommy."

"But what if he don't come back?" persisted the other. "We've not got all bleeding day."

"For God's sake, he's just taking the bloody dog for a walk," snapped Mac. "Give your mind a rest, Tommy. It's not up to overtime."

Daphne noted his reaction with interest. What had Tommy meant by not having all day? What was their hurry? It couldn't make any difference to getting into the shop if Ted didn't show up for another hour or more. So it must have something to do with afterward.

A getaway, perhaps?

But it was hardly the crime of the century, was it? They wouldn't be jetting off to some South American hideout on what they were likely to be getting from Ted's strongroom. A couple of months on the Costa del something, perhaps—

And then it came to her. What if the Costa del something was already where they lived? Her eyes took in Mac's tan and his fancy clothes. It all fitted. What if they'd come across to do this job and were keen to get back to their sunny safety before anyone spotted them and started hunting out old warrants? They could have a nice safe flight booked back that afternoon. A package probably, less risky than a scheduled flight, and from Luton only thirty minutes away for a quick driver.

It was a nice theory, marred only by the absence of real motivation. No one like Mac was going to risk his liberty for the contents of Ted's downmarket little jeweler's shop.

All the same, she found herself unable to resist testing it out.

She said, "It must be hot living in Spain this time of year."

She had the satisfaction of seeing a giveaway frown of surprise

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crease his face. Then he smiled and said, "Having second thoughts, are we, Mrs. Davis?"

It was an odd answer but she ignored it in the glow of self-congratulation. Ted would scornfully put her feat of inductive reasoning down to a diet of paperback thrillers and TV crime series. He had a way of diminishing everything she did. She didn't doubt but that he'd find some way of criticizing her reaction to this crisis. At least she was coping as well as he would. He had no skill for dealing with unforeseen complication. He'd always rather walk away from trouble than face up to it.

Well, he'd literally walked away from it today.

She realized that she was beginning to feel uncomfortable and stood up.

"I need to go to the bathroom," she said in response to Mac's querying gaze.

"You're sure? I mean, if you've got any more daft ideas, forget it. You'll leave the door open and Tommy here will be standing outside. Still want to go?"

She looked at Tommy, who pursed his lips and made an obscene kissing sound.

"I've got to," she said. "Only I'd rather you came with me than that animal."

"You think I'm more of a gent, do you?" Mac laughed. "That's the nicest thing anyone's said about me in years. All right. Let's go."

He motioned her ahead of him. She went out of the lounge, turned toward the stairs. He said, "No."

"What?"

"I saw a cloakroom down here. It's got no windows to shatter or jump through. It'll do nicely. In you go."

She went in. At first she was inhibited by the idea of his presence beyond the door, but her need proved greater than her inhibition. When she came out, she saw that she needn't have worried. He was sitting some distance away at the foot of the stairs. He looked tired. She readjusted her estimate of his age. The tan and expensively casual dress had deceived her. He was probably older than she was. Perhaps a bit of sun and styling would take her back from forty to thirty. Ted had tried to push her in that direction a few years ago but it had all seemed a waste of time and money. They would be celebrating their twentieth anniversary soon. Why try to look as if you got married at the age of ten?

Mac stood up rather wearily.

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"Is it worth it?" she said. "I mean, for what you're likely to get."

He shook his head and said thoughtfully, "I'm still not sure about you, Mrs. Davis. They said you were a quiet little nobody—"

"They?" she said, absurdly piqued. "This is the same 'they' who didn't warn you Ted might go out the back way with his dog? I'd ask for a refund."

"Maybe I will," he said. "All right. Enough talk. Get back inside. *Move!*"

The change of tone alarmed her.

She said, "I thought I might make a few sandwiches—"

"Crap. You're starting to think because I don't flex my muscles all the time like Tommy, I'm the one you can work on. Don't. The only difference between me and Tommy is I need a reason for breaking bones. But I'll do it if I have to, you'd better believe me."

She believed him.

Back in the lounge, Mac returned to his position by the window. Tommy was sitting in an armchair as they'd left him, but when Daphne glanced at the drinks cabinet she saw the stopper was out of the whisky decanter. Tommy caught the direction of her gaze and glowered at her as he drained what must by now be a cup of very cold coffee.

The church clock struck the second quarter.

The first sign they would see of Ted's return would be Lady. He always let her off the leash once in sight of the house and she would come bounding up the garden, as excited as if she had been away for weeks. Daphne hoped the two men would remember what they had been told and not mistake her enthusiasm for menace. Mac might think twice but she doubted if Tommy would think even once.

She wished she knew how tight their timetable was. Perhaps Ted wouldn't get back in time. Once it had been hard to get him out of his chair to throw a ball for Lady in the back garden, but in the past few months he had developed a taste for longer and longer walks. As he said, a big dog needs a lot of exercise.

"Where are you going?"

Mac's voice, harsh and authoritative, jerked her out of her reverie. Tommy had risen from his chair and moved toward the door. "Thought I'd take a look around," he said. "Even a bent jeweler wouldn't stick his old lady with bits of glass, would he? Might be some nice stuff upstairs."

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"Sit down, dummy. We've not come here for a few beads and bangles."

"It might be all we get from the way things are going," retorted Tommy. "If he's not back soon, what the hell do we do? Leave a message saying we'll call again next week? Me, I want something to show for wasting my time, even if it's only a good-luck charm."

"You'll need more than *one* if you don't do as you're told," snapped Mac. "I don't want some nosy neighbor spotting you wandering around upstairs."

"They'd just think the duchess here was spreading herself for her fancy man. Though looking at her, that might be a bit hard to credit."

"Looking at you, it would be quite impossible!" exclaimed Daphne.

Common sense told her it was pointless rising to Tommy's gibes, but it was out before she could think. Instantly, she regretted it as he moved swiftly toward her and thrust the shotgun hard against her throat.

"Don't need to be no oil painting when you've got one of these, girl," he said. "Know what the worst thing about hanging around here is? I'm getting to fancy you 'cos there's bugger-all else! So talk, you slag! If there's any way of getting him back here quick, spit it out or I'll carve you another mouth under your chin!"

You didn't get used to terror. It came up spring-fresh every time. She rolled her eyes toward Mac in desperate appeal. He came slowly forward and stood by the chair, looking down at her.

"You may have something there, Tommy," he said. "What do you say, Mrs. Davis? Is there anywhere he might have called in? You mentioned the golf club—"

"Yes, yes," babbled Daphne. "He might have walked across there. He's a member. He could have called in for a drink. He often does."

"Right."

He picked up the table with the telephone on it and placed it next to her chair. "Right," he said.

She didn't move, not out of defiance but terror.

Tommy reached down and squeezed her left breast till she shrieked in pain.

"Now, ring," he said, relaxing his grip to an obscene caress.

"What should I say?" she gasped.

"She could say she's sick," said Tommy, looking at Mac.

He shook his head and said, "No. We don't want him turning up with a doctor. Golf clubs are full of quacks. And we don't want him suspicious."

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He stared speculatively at Daphne. "Spain," he said. "What does Spain mean to you, Mrs. Davis?"

"Nothing. I don't know. Ahh!" She screamed again as Tommy renewed the pressure. "What do you want me to say?"

He smiled. "Just say there's been a phone call from Spain. It sounded urgent but the man wouldn't leave a message. He said he'd ring back soon, though." He glanced at his watch. "On the hour, say. Tell him, on the hour."

"But why?"

"Just do it!"

His anger was more frightening than even Tommy's threat. She dialed. His face came close enough for her to feel his breath as he listened to the ringing tone.

"Hello. Clubhouse. Steward. Can I help you?"

"It's Mrs. Davis," she said unsteadily. "Mrs. Ted Davis. Is my husband there, please?"

"I haven't seen him, Mrs. Davis, but if you hold on I'll check."

There was a pause of nearly a minute, then another voice came down the line.

"Hello, Daphne. It's Tony. I gather you're looking for Ted."

"That's right. Have you seen him? He took Lady for a walk and I need to get hold of him rather urgently."

"Nothing wrong, I hope?"

"Oh, no." She managed a poor relation of a laugh. "Just that someone needs to get hold of him in a frightful hurry and they're ringing back. It's from Spain. Business, I think."

"Ah, business, eh? Look. I've just finished playing and I did think I saw that Labrador of yours galloping across the practice ground. Could be Ted's in the vicinity. I'll stick my head out and if there's any sign I'll tell him to contact you tooty-sweet, right?"

"That's very kind of you, Tony. 'Bye."

She put the receiver down and looked at Mac. She was sweating freely from nervous reaction. He said, "Tony?"

"A friend. Of Ted's."

"Locker-room friend, not one of your favorites?"

He was very sharp.

"No. Does it matter?"

"What do we do now?" interrupted Tommy, impatient of this meaningless exchange.

"We wait," said Mac. "Nothing else to do. But I think my money's on good old Tony finding good old Ted."

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The phone began to ring just as the church clock started to sound the third quarter.

"Daph, it's me. Tony's just dragged me into the clubhouse. Something about a phone call from Spain. What's it all about?"

She took a deep breath, but words wouldn't come. She looked in appeal and fear at the tall man who returned her gaze neutrally, as if uncertain how best to respond. A threat would have finished her off. But suddenly he smiled and pointed at the mouthpiece and nodded encouragingly.

"Daph? Are you there? Daph!"

"Yes. I'm sorry," she said. "The line went faint. Look, it's just that there was this call, not a good connection and his English wasn't marvelous. He was very keen to get hold of you, I could make out that much. I said you were out but should be back any time and he said okay—or perhaps it was *olé*, he'd ring back on the hour. This was thirty minutes ago and I really did think you'd be back. But time went by and I began to wonder if you'd got stuck at the club, so I thought I'd try to get in touch in case it was something important. Is it important?"

There was a silence.

"Probably not," he said. "But I'd better get back all the same."

"Yes. You should make it all right if you don't dawdle," said Daphne.

"Yes, setting off now. See you soon. 'Bye."

The line went dead. She put the phone down.

"That was good," said Mac. "You did well."

"Did I?"

"Yes. I liked the *olé*. Nice touch. Funny, though."

"What is?"

"When you were talking to Tony, you were nervous. Once you got going talking to Ted, you stopped being nervous. Why, I ask myself."

Tommy, who'd been listening in puzzlement, broke in.

"Hey, you don't reckon the sly cow's been passing coded messages, something like that?"

"Try not to be stupid all the same, Tommy," sighed Mac. "Ninety-five percent's quite enough. You're not close enough for codes, are you, Mrs. Davis? In fact, you're not very close at all."

"Close?" she echoed with great bitterness. "Oh, no. We're not even as close as the golf club."

Mac's attention was diverted before he could reply. Tommy, his

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face tight with resentment, had gone to the drinks cabinet and poured himself a large glass of Scotch.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"I'm sick of being called stupid," said Tommy. "If I'm so stupid, how come you need me on the job?" He downed the drink in one go.

Mac's anger was livid on his face but he controlled it. "There's no time for this, Tommy," he said. "He's on his way. Get to that window and sing out as soon as you see any sign. And keep that great fat head of yours out of sight!"

Tommy looked ready to be offended once more, then Daphne said, "I shouldn't worry—he won't be coming that way."

Mac turned his attention and his anger to her. "What's that mean?" he demanded. "You'd better stop being clever with me, lady, or I'll rearrange your face."

"No need for that. All I'm saying is that while it's only ten minutes' walk from the golf club, Ted's got farther to come." She felt herself amazingly calm. "His dear friend Tony must have guessed or known where he really was and rung him up to warn him that I was trying to get hold of him urgently. So Ted rang me. But he got right through, you see. The phone at the club's a pay phone."

"So he wasn't at the club," said Mac. "Where do you think he really was?"

"At Little Morton would be my guess," she said. "That's a village about thirty minutes' walk away. There's a woman lives there—Betty Stanton, a widow, very attractive, very expensive. I've met her a couple of times. She's always very friendly but we don't like each other. Now I know why. No, I think to be honest, I've known for a while, but knowing and admitting aren't the same, are they? I took Lady for a walk over there a couple of weeks ago when Ted was away—on business, he said. When we got near the village, Lady ran off and I found her sitting on Mrs. Stanton's doorstep. I went up the path to get her and a passing neighbor, thinking I was calling, told me Mrs. Stanton was away for a few days. I think I knew then."

"It's a hard life," said Mac indifferently. "So what you're saying is, he'll need a lift from there. Which will bring him to the front."

"He'll probably say Tony brought him."

"You reckon?" Mac consulted his watch. "Five to. Could be here any time. Tommy, keep watching out the back just in case the lady's wrong. I'll take the front."

He drew his automatic and went out.

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"Thinks he's God, that bastard," said Tommy. "Where the hell do you think you're going?"

"Into the kitchen. I want a glass of water," said Daphne.

"No way! You sit quiet, slag, or I'll give you a little tranquilizer with my fist. I shouldn't like to have to do that. You and me are going to be spending a bit of time together while Mac and dirty old Ted go off for the loot and I don't like my women unconscious."

"That's the only way you'll ever get near me, you ape," she said scornfully, and set off for the kitchen.

Her defiance took him by surprise and she was through the kitchen door before he caught up with her. Once more he grabbed her by the hair.

"They all talk brave to start with," he mocked, "but this soon has them doing tricks their mummies never taught them."

He tried to thrust the shotgun up her skirt. She shrieked and twisted round to claw his face. But he controlled her with a grip on her hair and forced her back against a waist-high kitchen unit. She felt as if its edge in the small of her back was going to break her spine and flung her arms sideways to try to thrust away from it.

His face came toward her, his mouth wide, red and slavering like a hungry animal's. Then Mac was in the doorway saying, "What the hell's going on? He's just driven by with some tart. He'll be here any moment. Let her loose, you stupid bastard."

Tommy relaxed his grip on Daphne's hair and turned to face Mac. "I told you not to call me stupid!" he yelled, brandishing the shotgun.

And Daphne's hand struck the wooden knife-holder she'd been half consciously searching for, her fingers tightened round the handle of the big butcher's knife, and she pulled it out and swung it with all her might to plunge deep into Tommy's right arm. His fingers splayed, sending the gun skittering across the tiled floor. The sharp blade sliced clear through the biceps muscle and drove into the ribcage, pinning his arm to his body. He screamed and pirouetted away from her as his left arm clawed vainly at the knife's handle, which it could grasp but not withdraw. His staggerings brought him up against Mac, who seized him round the waist, took a firm hold of the handle, and ripped it out in one violent movement.

Tommy shrieked again, glared at Daphne with a promissory hatred, and collapsed in his partner's arms.

Mac tossed the knife into the sink.

"Oh, Mrs. Davis," he said, "they really should have warned me about you."

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"I didn't mean—I didn't—he—"

The front doorbell rang. She pushed the hair back from her brow, realized there was blood on her fingers, grabbed a tea-towel and began to wipe it off. Her tongue was loose again.

"That'll be Ted," she said. "He never has a key, only the shop key. He knows I'm always here, you see, the bastard—"

"Don't go hysterical on me now," said Mac. "Pass me that towel."

He began to bind it round Tommy's arm.

The bell rang again.

"What will you do?" asked Daphne fearfully.

"What's to do? I can't leave Tommy to take care of you now, can I? And there's the fancy woman. She'll be parked a few yards up the road waiting to see if lover-boy comes flying out on his ear. In any case, the way things have turned out, I doubt if threatening you was going to have him exactly rushing to open up his safe!"

"What do you mean?" asked Daphne.

"I'll spell it out, though I'm sure someone sharp as you must have had some idea. He's bent, that husband of yours. Where do you think the money all comes from, eh? He's a fence and a hard bastard in a bargain, too. Few months ago there was a whisper in Marbella that Ted Davis was buying himself a nice little villa up in the hills. Not a holiday place but permanent. Retirement, a life in the sun. Give us another towel, will you?"

"Retirement? But—" Her mouth was dry. She passed him the towel.

"I thought you knew all about it when you made that crack about Spain. But gradually it dawned on me you didn't. Well, you know now. You're well rid of him. I can't say I fancied him as a neighbor. Fences get rich off honest crooks' graft. Then we got another whisper he was planning to double his pension fund with a last investment in some dodgy industrial diamonds. So some of us decided it'd be fun to pop back here and take them off him. The joke is—or was—he couldn't complain, could he? So Tommy and I flew in this morning on a package flight and we're due out in two hours on another. Not long enough for there to be much risk of being clocked by the filth, see? Christ, he's an impatient sod, isn't he?"

The bell was ringing continuously now. Mac had made a pad out of the second towel and placed it against Tommy's rib wound, then forced the hand of his damaged arm into his trouser pocket to hold the pad in place. The man was conscious, though his color wasn't

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very healthy. He groaned and swore at his partner's roughness, but lacked the strength to resist.

"What a big baby it is," said Mac. "Don't worry about him too much, Mrs. Davis. I don't think you got the lung and I know a quack who owes me a favor."

"I won't worry," said Daphne. "When was he going?"

"Was?" He raised his eyebrows. "Week after next was the word."

"Our anniversary week," she said.

"Nothing like a surprise. I'll be off now, Mrs. Davis. If you're ever in Puerto Bunus, look us up. Tommy will be delighted to see you. *Hasta la vista!*"

He unlocked the kitchen door and led his weak and staggering partner out into the garden. Presumably they had a car parked somewhere close. She didn't watch which way they went, but turned toward the hall, which was echoing to the sound of her name and the beat of her husband's fist against the door. Her foot kicked against something hard as she left the kitchen. It was Tommy's shotgun. She picked it up and laid it on the hall table as she passed.

She opened the door.

It was like looking at a stranger, like being looked at by a stranger.

She let her eyes slide by him. At the end of the drive she could see Lady, her tail wagging as she addressed herself to someone hidden behind the tall brick gatepost.

"Daph, what's happening? Why didn't you answer the door?" her husband asked fearfully.

He tried to step inside, but she blocked the way. "Why don't you fetch Mrs. Stanton inside?" she said, meeting his gaze without blinking until he turned and went down the drive.

As he walked away, the church clock began to sound the quarters.

She went back into the lounge, picking up the shotgun en route.

After a little thought, she sat on the armchair opposite the sofa, placing the gun between her thigh and the side of the chair and covering it with a cushion.

A few moments later she heard low voices in the hall.

"In here," she called.

As they came into the room, she heard the church clock striking the twelve notes of noon.

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NICE SINGLES with Christian values wish to meet others. FREE magazine. Send age, interests. Singles, P.O. Box 310-IO, Allardt, TN 38504.

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BEAUTIFUL BRITISH LADIES & ELIGIBLE GENTLEMEN seek American ladies & gentlemen for Friendship/Romance/Marriage! Free details: English Rose Agency, 2nd Floor, Mill Lane House, Mill Lane, Margate, Kent, England. Tel: 01144-843-290735.

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MUNCHIES with your mysteries! Six recipes, $5. SASE: Munchies, P.O. Box 46782, Papillion, NE 68046.

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ELLERY QUEEN

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING ORDER FORM

Send to **ELLERY QUEEN MAGAZINE**
Classified Advertising Department Suite 1401
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15 WORD MINIMUM
Only $48.00 for 15 Words or Less
$3.20 each additional word
Capitalized words add—40¢ per word
SAVE 15% WITH 3 CONSECUTIVE MONTHS SAME COPY ORDER

DEADLINE: Copy and payment must be in by the 5th day of the third preceding month for issue in which ad is to appear.

_____ Words at $3.20 each $ _____
_____ Capitalized word at 40¢ each
Total amount for 1 ad $ _____

15% Savings with 3 Consecutive Months Discount
(a) Multiply one ad total $_____ x 3 = $_____
(b) Multiply total amount on above line by x .85
(c) Total amount for 3 ads $ _____
(Example: One 15 word ad $48.00 x 3 months $144.00 x .85 $122.40)

(PLEASE PRINT OR TYPE)

YOUR NAME _____
FIRM (NAME IN AD) _____
ADDRESS _____
CITY _____ **STATE** _____ **ZIP** _____
PHONE: _____ **DATE:** _____
YOUR SIGNATURE _____

$_____ is enclosed for _____ insertion(s) of the _____ issue(s) _____ Heading

(FOR ADDITIONAL WORDS ATTACH SEPARATE SHEET)

(1) **$48.00**	(2) **$48.00**	(3) **$48.00**	(4) **$48.00**	(5) **$48.00**
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(16) **$51.20**	(17) **$54.40**	(18) **$57.60**	(19) **$60.80**	(20) **$64.00**
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HOW TO COUNT WORDS. Name and address must be included in counting the number of Words in your ad. Each initial or number counts as 1 word. Mark Holly, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017 = 7 WORDS. Zip codes are not counted. Phone # = 2 Words. Symbols used as keys are charged for. City or State count as 1 word each. Garden City, New York = 2 words. Abbreviations such as C.O.D., F.O.B., P.O., U.S.A., 7x10, 35mm count as 1 word. (P.O. Box 145 count as 3 words.) Webster's International Unabridged Dictionary will be used as our authority for spelling, compound words, hyphens, abbreviations, etc. **Please make checks payable to ELLERY QUEEN MAGAZINE.**

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Featuring a short novel by CLARK HOWARD (Deeds of Valor)

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JEAN POTTS (about the Lady Macbeth Case)

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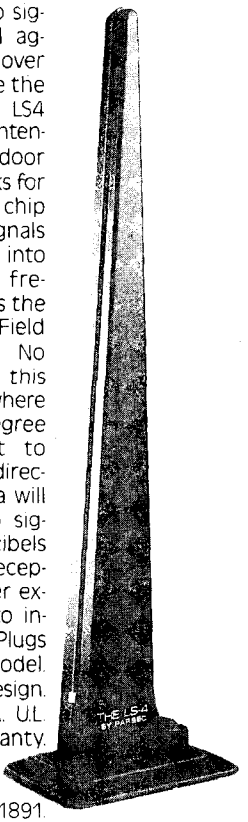
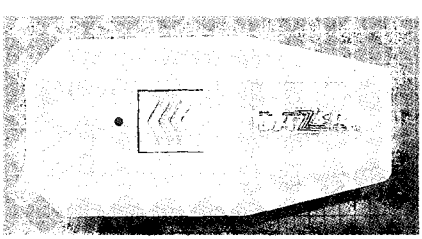


▼ THE DAZER™



Even the most dedicated canine aficionado can sometimes encounter unfriendly dogs. Dazer™ provides a humane way to repel their advance, emitting ultrasonic sound waves inaudible to humans and totally safe for dogs (unlike mace and other common deterrents). Pocket size (4¾" long) plastic case can also clip on belt; takes 1-9V battery, included. For joggers, hikers, bikers, seniors and kids—plus the proverbial postman. **$29.98**, ($3.00) #A1829X.

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▼ EVERYTHING BAG

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Most of the convenience waxes you buy actually dry out wood instead of nourishing it. What's the alternative? Our choice is Williamsville Wax. It is made of beeswax and lemon oil, heat-blended with other natural oils. It can be used on any type of wood, any type of finish, on paneling or kitchen cabinets as well as fine furniture. Williamsville Wax is super for restoring neglected or mistreated wood. Two 8-oz. bottles cost **$13.98** ($3.25) #A14312.

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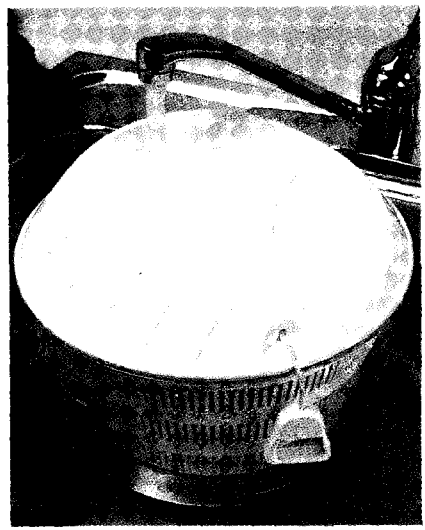

The Jet Spin Washer/Dryer for salad greens and vegetables, does a better job with less effort than any other method of preparation. As the stream of water hits the spinning inner basket, it bursts into spray, giving the contents a good drenching before being carried off by centrifugal action. Flywheel action keeps basket spinning with only a few gentle tugs. Spray wash coaxes dirt and grit from innermost lettuce wrinkles. Turn off the faucet and with a few more tugs the remaining water spins away, leaving you with crisp clean salad greens, so dry they are positively perky. Also works for fruits and vegetables. The Jet Salad Washer/Dryer is self-draining, splashfree. **$19.98** ($4.50) #A1520.

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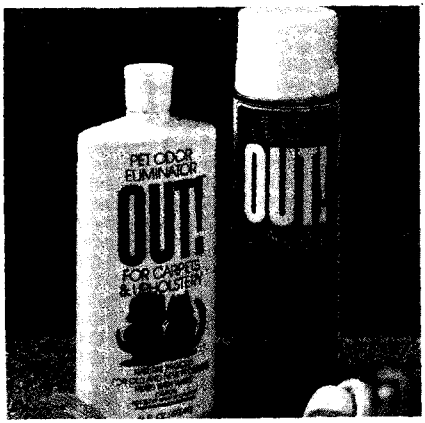

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